

In this episode, we are joined by Rhian Thomas and Elaine Maul from Ammanford Lions, mosaic artist Dani Lee, and community member and poet Melissa Lewis. They join Samantha Boffin to talk about a stunning mural in Ammanford made by the hands and hearts of 50 local volunteers and lions members. The mural was commissioned by Ammanford Lions to mark 50 years of supporting the town funded by a 5,000 pound National Lottery grant. Following on we hear from Rhian Thomas and Elaine Maul recalling how they stepped forward and joined Ammanford Lions.

Be uplifted, be inspired. This is Step Forward and Volunteer.

Welcome to the latest episode of the popular Step Forward and Volunteer podcast brought to you by Lions Clubs British Isles.

My name is Samantha Boffin and I'd like to thank you for tuning in.

If you haven't listened before, our aim is simple. We want to celebrate the positive difference volunteering makes to communities across the British Isles and beyond. To do that, we'll be speaking to those who give up their time to help others, inspiring more people to step forward and volunteer.

In this episode, we are joined by Rhian Thomas and Elaine Maul from Ammanford Lions, mosaic artist Dani Lee, and community member and poet Melissa Lewis. They join us to talk about a stunning mural in Ammanford made by the hands and hearts of 50 local volunteers

and lions members. The mural was commissioned by Ammanford Lions to mark 50 years of supporting the town funded by a 5,000 pound National Lottery grant.

Next we hear from Rhian Thomas and Elaine Maul recalling how they stepped forward and joined Ammanford Lions.

But first, I have a favour to ask. We'd like your help in getting the word out about Step Forward and Volunteer. Tell your family, tell your friends - and if you're a Lions member, why not let other members of your club know about the podcast - and how easy it is to listen. All you need to do is either go on the website www.lionsclubs.co where you will see a link to the podcast, or you can search for Step Forward and Volunteer on apps like Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts and Google podcasts.

You can listen on-demand or subscribe so that you never miss an episode. We publish a new programme on the second Wednesday of each month, and we're really keen to spread the positivity and get as many people listening as we can.

The design and creation of the Ammanford Lions community mural is a true labour of love by local people who were involved from start to finish.

Now I've got to say hello, one by one, because we've never had so many guests together on the podcast.

Hello, Rhian, Hi Sam, Hello Elaine, Hi Sam, Hello Dani, Hello, Oh and hello Melissa, Hello.

Rhian, could you tell us what sparked the idea for this really very special project?

Yes, well, Ammanford Lions Club was founded in 1970. So back in 2019, we were thinking of the 50th anniversary coming up the following year. And apart from having a more special anniversary dinner, we wanted to do something more permanent, to mark the occasion. And it was Elaine, who came up with the idea because she had been to a mosaic workshop, and the whole club liked the idea. And then we set about finding somewhere in Ammanford that was suitable for the mosaic, and of course, we had to find an artist who could lead the project.

Wow. That's incredible. So Elaine, before you could begin to even source the funding. Could you tell us how you went about applying to the National Lottery? And I mean, was it a while before you'd heard you'd been successful?

No, it was quite quick really. The thing was, when we started, we were actually involved with a different community artist. Another artist had done some workshops locally. And I approached her. She suggested the national lottery and helped us through the application process, the forms not difficult, although it's quite involved, and several questions repeat themselves. So you worry about whether you're writing the right things in the right places. But she advised us that the most important thing was to keep stressing how we were going to involve the local community. We applied in the November of 2019, and it was approved in the January of 2020. So it was quite quick, really.

So, that's really interesting. So you originally had a different artist? Why did you change that Rhian?

Well, as Elaine said, we had the grant in early in 2020. And we were just getting going with the project with the mosaic artist we'd found when, of course, COVID hit the country. And we all went into lockdown. So everything stopped really for probably 18 months. And when we were finally ready to get going again, our original mosaic artist was unable to help us because she had illness in the family. And we were very fortunate to find Dani, who was absolutely wonderful, so well organized, and led us through the process with ease. And as you know, the mosaic is absolutely wonderful. We're all delighted with it.

That's amazing. So Dani, have you got a background in mosaic making?

Yeah, so I've been a community artist for about 25 years. I studied in sculpture in the 90s. But pretty much all of that 25 years, I've been making mosaic murals. So in London, originally and then for the last 15 years in Wales. So yeah, they're all over like so I make mosaic murals, predominantly with people. So with communities, or with schools, sometimes hospitals, and also club murals, and sculpture, allsorts, but it is mostly mosaic murals. Yes.

Wow. That's amazing and so Dani, Ammanford Lions, commissioned you to work on this piece of mosaic art, and I understand the community were really very much a part of it. How did you involve all the community?

So we started with some community design workshops. And that's where everyone got together, I introduced the project. And we played around with different ideas and designs

that people wanted to include in it. So with community designs. It's very much lots of different ideas. So there's lots of elements to this design and then the community came in again, once we collaborated all their ideas into one composition. They came in, and I showed them how to make the mosaic. And then they got involved and it was brilliant. So they created everything really. I just showed them how.

Oh, that's amazing. Did you run some workshops for them then? Yeah, there was a few design workshops. And then we had seven days of mosaic workshops. And that's when the whole mosaic was created in seven days.

Wow. And so what people were involved in your workshops?

We had lots of adult members of the community, anybody who wanted to come it was advertised really widely. So anyone around Ammanford, we stipulated that you needed to live within the community of Ammanford, or locally in the villages around. And then we involved the schoolchildren, and primary school. And alongside the mosaic workshops, a ceramic artist I invited in to create some ceramic pieces with the children in school. So they've, for instance, made some little caterpillars, the pick and shovel, which is quite an emblem of Ammanford. And some of the butterfly antennae. They made different elements a bit in tiles in ceramic, and then the ceramic artists glaze them and then we've included them in the mosaic.

Well, on that note, can you describe the mosaic? Yes,

So I will try. Yes, there's a lot going on. So in the foreground, we've got the Marsh Fritillary butterfly. And this is a butterfly that's just recently been reintroduced into the Amman Valley around Ammanford. And we've also got its primary food source, which is the devil's bit scabious. And this is a really lovely purple globe flower. And so those two elements are in the foreground and behind that we've got the mountains and it's more of a suggestion of the mountains in a swell. And on top of that we've got the mountains of Ammanford the main Mountain is Betws mountain. And on top of that there's a wind farm. So we've got a few wind turbines on the top of that as well. So just to really bring it into the locality, it's not any old mountain, it's our mountain, you know. And then coming down from the mountains is the river, is kind of swirling down, and there's some waves and some musical notes, and a few little words in there that the children made there's fish, fish in there, oh yes there's fish. And then what you've got underneath the mountain and the river and the devil's bit scabious there are roots coming down from a devil's bit scabious and then it sort of suggests this next element is underground. So we've got a big miners lamp that's maybe about a metre tall. And this miners lamp is lit there's a little flame at the bottom. And coming out from the flame is this lovely glow. That's that spreads to like a metre and a half wide. All of this is out of mosaic and it's very textural as well. And the flame is in like a lovely, shimmery red glass. And on the outside edges of this glow is a poem that's written by Melissa. You're gonna hear in a little while.

So Elaine, how did you go about choosing the visual elements in the mural?

Well, the two key parts of the mural are the miners, the miners lamp, the coal, and the Marsh Fritillary butterfly and the devil's bit scabious flower. And the link between those two is obviously, it was a mining area, there were lots of mines in the surrounding area. And in the past what the miners used to do, the way they used to farm the uplands in the Brynamman and the Cinnamon and areas was they had small fields that provided them with sort of extra you know, they'd have a cow as an extra support for their income. And because there are so many fields in the local area now that are still grazed and managed in that way. It's absolutely ideal for the devil's bit scabious flower to grow, because it's not overly managed. And that is the only food source for the Marsh Fritillary butterfly. So the Marsh Fritillary butterfly managed to survive in this area. And it's actually now thriving because of that mining heritage of how the land was managed. And the Marsh Fritillary butterfly, I must admit before we started the project, I can't quite imagine how such a complicated design would end up as a mosaic but Dani's absolutely brilliant. So it's worked.

Amazing read most of the butterfly as well the difference and the devil's bit scabious flower as well. It's such a pretty flower. Again, it's one of those things where you think, how on earth was Dani going to pull this off, but it just works. And so all three elements, they both show the history, and also the future going forward in that. It's an area that is supporting a butterfly, which is actually rare in other parts of the UK. But it's thriving here. Wow.

Absolutely lovely. It's such a personal reason behind all of the things that you chose for it.

That's incredible.

I tell you what we were only out the other week with a local conservation group actually searching them out. And we managed to find quite a few it's a pretty butterfly.

What a great name for a plant Devil's bit Scabious. Yeah, wow, And how big is the mural, then?

Oh, I think the top of it is, it's about four metres high. So the elements are spaced out. It's like a big jigsaw puzzle. So there's the background, the building that it's on is a pub. And the pub is painted a like a really lovely midnight blue. So that's worked in our favour. So the mural is not a solid block. It's sort of spaced out with the pub background colour in between it.

So this is the Old Cross Inn in Ammanford? Yes. Okay, fantastic. And how did you actually install it on the side of the pub?

I mean, so it was created in a local hall flat on tables, and the method I use is the indirect method. So we attach each mosaic piece to plastic mesh, so we ended up with these big panels as their flexible mesh. And so you can then lift up these panels and put the tile adhesive on the wall and then squidge the panels into the tile adhesive so the tile adhesive

then comes through the mesh and attaches to each tile. Then once it's all stuck together so that all goes on, on pieces that are kind of butt up against each other to create the design. And then once that's on the wall, we grout it, so I fill all the little gaps with the grout. So then it becomes really part of the wall and then all the bits around the edges we paint back the colour of the wall. Yeah, so it sits nicely into the wall. So yeah. So you've just got the mosaic and the blue background.

That must have been incredible both laying it out presuming you lay it all out in this big hall first. Yes.

We had a stage to stand on, so we could look down on it laid out. So that was quite handy.

Wow, that sounds amazing. And then to see it, then go out that gosh. Yes. How extraordinary. Elaine, when it came to the unveiling of the mosaic mural? What was the reaction? Actually, how did you keep it secret?

Well, whilst we were putting it up on the wall, someone had actually lent us the scaffolding. So we had scaffolding that we were working on, because we had to stand up quite high to do some of the grouting. So that was actually stopping people from seeing but as people were walking past, they were clearly curious to know what we were on and what we were doing. So that was quite nice. That stirred up a lot of interest, I bet. And then, we covered it with curtains. Once it was all grouted for the big unveiling day. So that when it came to the

unveiling, obviously we you know, pulled the curtains away. But the day itself was fabulous, because we were blessed with fabulous weather. Lots of people came even though it was a weekday lunchtime, which was great. We had a local singer come along and provide live music. So it was a real sort of party atmosphere with we had refreshments. So we're really involved. And there were just so many people it was fabulous. I bet. The children from the school came along as well. To see all their handiwork that they've done. Yeah,

We hadn't realized, but Alex Jones from The One Show was recording in Ammanford for a programme to do with the Welsh language in the area. Wow. And we suddenly found that she was there too. I mean, that was totally not expected. But yeah, it was such a positive way to make people aware of Lions, it was it was just great.

Yeah know, I can imagine and now it's a real focal point in that. That's wonderful. So wow, what I was intrigued at is that if any of the listeners out there want to see the mosaic in, in real life. So as we said it decorates the side of the Old Cross Inn in the centre of Ammanford. And what I love about it, if you try and find it using the three words, location finder, the three words for it are token, wonderful, and musical. And all it's filled those things. Yeah. It's wonderful, thank you so much for coming on the podcast and sharing the story behind this wonderful mural. So thank you, Rhian, Elaine, Dani, and Melissa. Thank you. Thank you.

So Melissa, you are the writer of the poem that is on the mural, can you can you tell us how you came to write it? What's the story behind it? And we would all love to hear it. Can you read it for our listeners, Melissa?

So during COVID, a sense of I think connection and togetherness was important in in seeing people through that very kind of difficult time. And the workshops then that Danny put on with other members of the community who come in listening to they're stories of connection to the local area that really helped. And I think because everybody didn't really have an art background as, as such, everybody was starting off on a level kind of playing field. So it was nice because it was so informal, and it was so welcoming, and you really felt like you could speak and have your ideas listened to. My family is from the local area. So the connection, I think, to the local area helped to the appreciation of the project. Also the heritage and what we were trying to achieve. My grandfather, he was a minor, he used to work in the Butchers mine and the near Scotch, which is near the Scotch Pine, which is a famous pub for it's views over the Amman Valley. He also worked in the Panther fund mine as well and the Betws mine together with my uncle. My father, when he came over from England, to live in Wales to be with my mother at the time. So going back to the poem, what was important, I think, was this kind of sense of gratitude, it being grateful for the hard work the resilient hearts who had tended paddocks, because life back then was really difficult, and it was hard?

Yes, it'd be a pleasure. Thank you.

Grateful are we

for the paddocks tended

by resilient hearts

who worked black gold

veins below our

beloved lands and marsh

For in your legacy

the Marsh Fritillary Butterfly

does again fly

And in the welcoming light

of togetherness

we do thrive

Wow, absolutely beautiful. There's some birdsong thrown in now.

Melissa, you obviously do, but nobody is be able to see this. But Melissa is sat outside in the most beautiful garden with gorgeous trees and sunshine behind her. I love that.

It's time now for a short break, we'll be back after this ...

Never miss an episode of Step Forward and Volunteer listen, via www.lionsclubs.co or subscribe via Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts or Google podcasts.

On the step forward and volunteer podcast, members share their stories to champion local community volunteering. Today, we are talking to Rhian Thomas and Elaine Maul from Ammanford Lions. Hello, Rhian and hello, hi. Rhian what, what brought you to becoming a lion? Well, my husband joined the Lions Club back in 1990. So I was very much aware of what went on in Lions and always joined in social events when partners were invited along. I think it was around 2000. Actually, I decided that I would like to become a Lion as well.

So, Elaine, do you have a similar story? Why did you become a Lion? No, I, I'd always volunteered. But in the scouting movement, when I lived back in London, and when we moved to Wales in 2017. To explain, I think a lot of members get involved through other people they know, so of course, I knew Rhian and her husband, Alan, because their daughter is now married to our son.

But if you know what I mean, of course, when we moved to Wales, or because I mean, I've done voluntary work since I was in my 20s, but all be it the cubs and scouts. When I found out about Lions through Rhian and Alan, we decided to become members. But I hasten to add, I had never heard of them until I came to Wales and got involved.

That's interesting, so Rhian, what's the thing that you most love about being a lion?

I think probably being part of a team. You know, you're with a group of people, like minded people who want to do their best for the community. And it's just good fun working together to organise fundraisers or a community event. And of course, social events as well.

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. What about you, Elaine, what do you think?

Yes, I'd agree? I think as well, the club gets involved in such a wide variety of things, too. You know, from looking after the local stations, or the gardens at the local stations through to getting involved with Children in Need, all the things at Christmas, the Santa sleigh runs, as a club we do so many different things. It's great.

Yeah, yeah. Lots of variation by the sound of things. Yeah. Yeah. Lots of ways to get involved together. Yeah. So how would you Rhian, how would you describe your local community and what Lions does for the local people in Ammanford?

Um, well, Ammanford is the third largest town in the county of Carmarthenshire. It's a former mining community. And it is recognised as a fairly deprived community. And the population of the town is about 8,000. But we take in Ammanford as the head base, to a much wider community, you know, the Amman Valley and so on, which embraces a lot of

rural areas. And what we do for the local community, little things, I suppose. But obviously, people can write to us and ask for help, monetary help. We also like to get stuck in doing things like litter picking. We've helped out at our local schools. As Elaine said, we looked after our local stations, we have to, we're on the Heart of Wales line. Yeah. So we are a busy little club, and we do lots of fun things.

And Elaine, as somebody who's relatively new to the community do you see it in the same way?

I've never been that conscious of it being a deprived area, although I guess, you know, statistically, it is. I mean, I found coming from sort of North London. How welcoming everybody is here. And the different things you do for the local community through Lions always seems to be very appreciated. Yeah. Which is, which is so nice, you know. We've radically changed I think, really, it would be fair to say, isn't it we in some of the things we do because of lockdown. We've always done a Santa sleigh where we used to take one of our older gentleman members as Santa round the different areas and we'd stay in about three or four different areas for half an hour. But we had to radically alter how we did that in lockdown. And in fact, we just toured the sleigh round, not stopping at all. And then the biggest kept secret was that it was me, was Santa. I had so many layers, it could have been anybody. And similarly, we changed how we did Children in Need. Whereas in fact, we've gone back to doing it now we take around about four or five teams of us who take someone dressed up as Pudsey to four different sets of schools. But because we couldn't do that during lockdown, so the first two years what we did, Rhian was our Pudsey, the first year we

did Pudsey visits Ammanford. And we did a little video that we put on YouTube, to show Rhian as our Pudsey in different places in Ammanford. And then I think the second year we did Pudsey makes cakes, so Pudsey visited a shop and bought stuff. And then Pudsey went back to Rhian's house and made cakes and sold them to a neighbour, that type of thing. So although lockdown was bad. I think as a club, it was brilliant. In that we, we adapted how we did things. And it was very much appreciated by everybody. So this is great being a lion.

Yeah, absolutely. And so, so Rhian, what's your strongest memory, your best memory of having a good time as a lion, presumably Pudsey bear.

Well yes, that is great fun, and having the children playing all over you and winding them up and leaving the teachers to sort out the chaos. One thing that sticks in my mind was we, as a club we are part of a zone, which consists of several clubs in the area. And somebody came up with the idea of world record attempt to make the longest joined string of spectacles. It's one of our projects collecting used spectacles for refurbishment. And yes, we found a big hall in Port Talbot. And loads of clubs got involved it was a lovely event, real team effort. And just generally a fun day. That really sticks in my mind.

I think you've got a real strong sense I always think with lions is how much the community feel that togetherness is so important. Both within the club and, and for what you offer outside of the club to local communities. Yeah. So Elaine, what's your strongest memory, your best memory of having a good time as a lion?

I think the mosaic project, to be honest, when Dani was first putting together the workshops. I think initially I was a bit worried that we wouldn't have many people come. But it was really positive how people were keen to get involved. And how so many people who've never done mosaics before, me included. Were ready to really get in there and get stuck in and in actual fact, people were almost fighting over places in the end, because everybody wanted to then when they saw how good it was. They wanted to take part that really was very rewarding doing that with a local community group. So yeah, yeah. And a real legacy.

I mean to me as well. Yes. as well. Yeah.

Amazing. Amazing. So Rhian what would you say, to encourage other people to step forward and get involved with lions?

When you're talking informally to somebody and lions comes up you know, to mention it with enthusiasm. Tell them what it's about that it's not just a club. Our motto is we serve but it's also about the fun and fellowship we get out of it. You know, our social activities, as I said, being part of a team and, and doing good even in a small way. And I usually encourage them to come along to one of our activities. And if they like it, they might continue to volunteer or join the club and become a member.

Brilliant. And, Elaine, what do you say to encourage others to get involved I think

it's just having some fun whilst helping what's going on in your local community? That it doesn't I think sometimes of volunteering people can be wary of how much time am I expected to give up, but people can feel free to give as much or as little as they like, so long as they enjoying it. Were all very, you know, a lovely friendly group. Give it a try, I think is the you know what I'd say to people, and you'd be surprised by how drawn in you become.

Well, wise words, thank you very much. Rhian, Elaine, from Ammanford, Lions.

You're welcome.

That is all we have time for on this month's podcast. Don't forget you can also listen to past editions of the Step Forward and Volunteer podcast any time via www.lionsclubs.co or on Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts or Google podcasts.

If you would like to view the stunning Ammanford mural made by the hands and hearts of fifty local volunteers and Lions members, the mosaic decorates the side of The Old Cross Inn in the centre of Ammanford. It's what3words location is token, wonderful, musical. The work of the accomplished mosaic artist, Dani Lee can be located on her website danileearts.co.uk

This inspirational creation was featured in the Spring edition of the LION Magazine lionsclubs.co/Public/lion-magazine/

Thanks once again to our special guests Rhian Thomas and Elaine Maul from Ammanford Lions, mosaic artist Dani Lee, and community member and poet Melissa Lewis, and a big thank you to you our listeners as well. Take care and goodbye.