

**Alex Swift (interviewer)**

Croeso welcome. This is the Exchange podcast. I'm here with Barry Braun and Ceri. Do you want to explain who you are and what you do?

**Barry Braun**

So, I'm Barry Braun and I'm the founder of the Happy Community project and the idea of the Happy Community project is that our grandchildren and ourselves and our neighbours will need support as our world unfolds and the way they get that support is out of their local community and so when communities are socially connected and have a strong sense of belonging and have a culture of taking care of each other, then we have a better place to live.

**Ceri Cunningham**

Yeah, similar to Barry but in North Wales and based in North Wales in Blaenau-Ffestiniog and I work for a social enterprise called Cwmni Bro-Ffestiniog which is about self-help and about networking, within the community and further afield as well. So, for the benefits of that community, our community.

**Alex Swift (Interviewer)**

Thank you both for those introductions. I'm interested in discussing the idea of community. What examples have you seen of healthy and happy community in the work you've done and what can be done to encourage that on a wider scale?

**Barry Braun**

Well, we get requests from people who think that their communities are not quite healthy, and you know, they usually, there's things like divisiveness or people not knowing each other or a longing for a phrase that they use often is 'the way it used to be' and what they mean by that is people knew each other. You could go over for a cup of sugar or drop in for a cup of tea or something without being announced and they're feeling a loss of all of that. So, through the Happy Community project, we've been able to turn that around where they, you know, at least in a very large way. We've been able to turn that around where they've been able to say that their community is more socially connected, and that they do have a stronger sense of belonging and that they have developed a culture. That's actually put into practice by looking out for each other in a in a stronger way than they used to.

**Ceri Cunningham**

Yeah, again, I'd agree with Barry. I think we're very fortunate in the town and the community that we live in that we have a tradition of that, and we don't seem to have lost it. It is diminishing. It is getting smaller because of the pressures of the outside world, if you like, you know the economic pressures and all that stuff. But I think the recent pandemic highlights the strength of the community we live in and as Barry was saying about popping around for some sugar or some tea we're lucky and fortunate. That happens already and it hasn't diminished, but what we're trying to do is build on that culture of like self-help. I said earlier about resilience but how can we use that, not just as social resilience but turn that into economic resilience as well? So, build on them strengths of helping each other and we are a town that has been described as deprived economically and maybe we've carried that as something on our shoulders for too long. We were told that we are not entrepreneurs, but we are social entrepreneurs and there is a tradition of that as well and it comes from cooperation and working together. So, we're trying to tap into exactly what Barry was saying. Into that sense of community, and without sounding too strange, it's love really. You know when people talk about community, it is love.

### **Barry Braun**

So, I live in Nova Scotia Canada and in North America we have a sad statistic here that says that 75% of the people who live in Canada don't know their neighbours, have very little conversation if any conversation at all with their neighbours and the Happy Community projects role is to try and reverse that trend. And we've been able to develop processes that we've been able to apply in many places. Like Ceri, we live in Nova Scotia, New Scotland, and you're in Wales, I assume Ceri, but we still have some of those same traditions. It's not totally gone here, but we've gone to places where it does seem to be very, it seems to be exceptional and unusual if somebody does something nice for their neighbour. And those are the trends that we're working on, so we've been able to take this to many places in the United States, Canada and abroad in India, Uganda.

### **Ceri Cunningham**

Yeah, we're not going as far afield as Uganda. But we are working with our neighbours here and we're finding now that people are yearning for exactly what Barry was saying. That sense of community, that sense of working together, celebrating. And yeah, so we are working with local communities and throughout Wales really. I'm trying to spread this message.

**Barry Braun**

That's a really good word because I think people are yearning and I think COVID has helped them to develop a more intense awareness of how important community is in their lives.

**Ceri Cunnington**

I agree, but there seems to be this drive now towards the old ways of economic development and hopefully we have learned lessons. I think communities have and we've shown the strength of communities during this period. But what I'm finding now is I'm quite critical that maybe our government hasn't, or some governments haven't. And we're not learning the mistakes of the past in this drive towards economic growth and stuff, and I'm not sure.

**Barry Braun**

I think that's a universal attitude, that economy is everything. And unfortunately, what I've noticed in economic development is that they focus on developing entrepreneurs or trying to find the big win by getting some large company to move into the area right? And what we found is that economic development and social fabric go hand in hand. When you create a healthy social environment, business shows up.

**Ceri Cunnington**

Absolutely right, I think Welsh Government are moving towards that in our local government, if you like, with the foundational economy and looking more exactly at what you were saying, everything on social fabric and the everyday things in our lives. And instead of this investment in multinationals that don't really have – in a Welsh word, it's called Teyrngarwch - a relationship with that town, so all they are there for is the money and not the social fabric if you like. Maybe I'm being a bit kind of blasé. It's not true of everyone maybe, but yeah, I think that's generally true.

**Barry Braun**

Yeah, we created the happy Community project in a small town called Windsor, Nova Scotia and when we started it was a dying town. I don't know if dying is the right word, but it was definitely on the way out. The attitude of the people was it was on the way out, that there's nothing happening here, our young people are leaving. Look at all the businesses that are leaving and the businesses were leaving, and when they changed their attitude, downtown filled up and it became a vibrant community again. And a lot of that has to do with the story they tell themselves.

**Ceri Cunningham**

Absolutely. I was reading something about that, the story you tell yourself and it's that mindset of growth, isn't it?

**Alex Swift (Interviewer)**

I think that's a really powerful point you made about it's not so much 'build it and people will come'. You've got to give them a reason to, especially in the online age where you can buy everything online. There does have to be something unique about city centres to encourage people to come in the first place.

**Ceri Cunningham**

What's unique about city centres or town centres is the ownership of that town centre. You know it's not about extraction all the time. It's about interaction and it's changing so the High Street becomes something where you can have the services you really need, the everyday stuff, but also stuff around training and maybe care. You know it doesn't have to be like all these shiny, shiny high streets. No one from our town would buy a 34- or 64-inch tv from Blaenau Ffestiniog, they'd get it over the Internet so why are we?...we don't need to compete with everything. The Internet is here to stay, and you will always buy your massive tv screen or off the Internet. But we do have something unique to offer in the town and yeah, it's the community again.

**Barry Braun**

There's a strong relationship between community and business so people live in the community but business operates in the community and how they operate in the community very much affects the nature of the community and one of the trends, I don't know if it's true in Wales and England in general, but one of the trends here in Nova Scotia is governments have cut back on their social supports and made a greater dependency on non-profits to provide those social supports and it's the local business person who contributes to that? It's not the international business. Google does not contribute a nickel to any small community in terms of social support or Amazon and even the national businesses like Walmart that are in the in the community do not contribute taxes or donations to the not for profits that operate in the community. It's a local businessman that does.

**Ceri Cunningham**

80% of our local business community is businesses with under 10 employees. And they are little businesses. You know, in our town they act as social enterprises. They employ

locally. They spend locally. They sponsor the local football team they, you know, there is not much of a distinction between the social enterprises and the local small businesses rooted in communities.

**Alex Swift (interviewer)**

From an economic perspective do you think communities need to balance economic prosperity and so called “success” with the need for money to stay local and fund these sort of voluntary schemes and pilots?

**Ceri Cunnington**

One of our social enterprises is a sustainable tourism project. We use money made from tourism to invest back in the community. The profit we make from tourists is invested back in the community. We see that and then with that profit we buy local community assets, buildings. We turn them into a retail space for young people and flats above where young people can sort of live if they want to. But yeah, the balance is really difficult to strike sometimes but this is where maybe Welsh Government comes in with investment as well. I think Welsh government over the years have invested in the wrong places. And the model of economic development as we've touched on before, has been a failure, but I think there is an opportunity now. I know Welsh Government keeps saying what can be achieved at Community level by prioritizing the Welsh Government's priorities, but it should be the other way around. What could Welsh Government achieve by listening to the community's priorities? I think if we could get turn it around on its head, I think we'd be quite successful.

**Barry Braun**

The focus on GDP, which is what economic developments about does not value community values and it's amazing when communities refocus themselves on themselves as a community, how much they can accomplish in terms of local economy and sometimes that local economy is not necessarily what the government likes because it happens by exchange of goods and services without going through the formal system, but it also makes it sustainable in terms of our overall society and world which is struggling with that right now.

**Ceri Cunnington**

Aren't New Zealand looking at something like that now? Aren't they looking at how you measure wealth, how you measure prosperity? Not just in monetary forms.

**Barry Braun**

I don't know about New Zealand, but Bhutan kind of led the way with a Gross Happiness Index. They've got that in the United Nations, and I know that some countries have adopted it, unfortunately not here in North America.

**Ceri Cunnington**

Well, you seem happy enough.

**Barry Braun**

It seems to me to be a much better measure of a communities success 'cause if you take the elements of what happiness is, people do have to have shelter and food, so that's part of the happiness formula. But so is social connectedness. So is doing things for each other. So is a sense of fairness. Not someone gets all the wealth and I have nothing. So is safety and safety comes from knowing your neighbour and who they are. So, if you use an index like that, which I haven't seen anywhere here in North America being used but I have heard that in England they were using it to start making some of their policies. I don't know how true that is, but I've heard stories about that.

**Ceri Cunnington**

I'm not aware of them in England, but we do have a law called the Future Generations Act which kind of measures different principles and priorities between the environment, happiness, and that's a really good law, but I don't know how much teeth it's got at the moment. All public services and businesses have to have to adhere to this law that they have to take into account communities happiness and the environment when developing projects. That is really a good step forward, but it's going to take time to settle I think.

**Barry Braun**

That tends to be very challenging for governments in general because they have very simplistic thinking. They can't seem to handle complexity very well. It's about a single-issue politics problem that they try to solve. Whether it's addictions in communities or unemployment or whatever it is everything focuses on one thing when communities are a dynamic or organization that that integrate with each other. You know, everything affects everything else.

**Ceri Cunnington**

Yeah, absolutely. We call it Bara Brith which is like a pudding bread. We have the different ingredients, sultanas, raisins, everything but you need all these different concoctions to make the perfect bread.

**Alex Swift (Interviewer)**

COVID has laid a lot of the issues we're talking about bare hasn't it? Because you've seen problems with people's mental health. People have needed to look out for each other more and that really stresses the need for community. So, my question to you is, how do you think the coronavirus has affected your community's efforts to create that sense of togetherness moving forward and how do you think the pandemic can help you with that in a positive way?

### **Ceri Cunningham**

It really highlighted, like I said earlier, really highlighted the strengths of our community and it was heart-warming, but also, you know, I think 2 new social enterprises were created that are now still sustainable around food, local food, produce and one around community support. I think 3 or 5 new jobs were created within our enterprises that are sustainable. But we held some research during the pandemic, some community research. The town is about 4000 people and about 410 people answer the research, but what we found from that research was that not many people were worried about during the pandemic about their economic futures. They were more worried about their neighbour. They were more worried about supporting each other and that came clear through the research. So, we were able to use that, and now we're trying to show it to like it's everything we've been discussing here about the importance of community and that came out really clear. We can only do so much. We could do a lot as communities, but we do need that government, local Authority, agency supports because they hold some of the levers. We hold a lot of them, but they do hold some of them regarding investment and stuff. Further investment.

### **Barry Braun**

Yeah, I agree. When we started the Happy Community project, we said there's no "they should" only "we should" except they kept showing up. 'They' being the government, interfering and not always in a constructive way. But, I noticed to answer your question, I noticed that there's a common phrase that seems to be showing up coming out of COVID these days, here in where I live anyway, and that is, 'I don't know if I know how to socialize anymore'. There are people who are nervous or concerned that they lost their social skills, learning how to just have ordinary conversations with people because they haven't had them for a year and a half, more or less. I mean, it's not totally true that way, but it's a common phrase that I've heard from several people that I don't know if I know how to socialize anymore and they're struggling to relearn how to just do that.

### **Ceri Cunningham**

That is true. We're finding that lots amongst young people and we're doing things like...there is a real buzzword around here - social prescribing. So instead of people who are feeling low or having mental health problems, instead of prescribing them drugs, we offer outdoor activities and socializing slowly, cooking in the woods, that kind of stuff. So that's something we're really...and something that is really kind of, reconnecting. Using community to reconnect and not necessarily messages from government or whatever.

**Alex Swift (Interviewer)**

Moving on to a different sort of looming crisis, what do you think the responsibility of communities and or local authorities is in fostering environmental sustainability?

**Ceri Cunnington**

We can only do what we can do. I think, you know, the plastic bag stuff and the water stuff and recycling stuff we can do. But we can also show - I like this idea of 15-minute towns, 15-minute villages. Where every service is within 15 minutes, so you don't have to use your car as much. Again, we're going back to less dependency on cars so that your services are really close, your entertainment is close. I think we're going to have to live like that for a bit. OK, it's going on holidays once or twice a year. You'd maybe regulate that you know when the airplane stopped around here, it was bliss, you know. I don't want to over romanticize what COVID meant but right at the beginning of Covid the world stopped for a minute and it was absolutely beautiful because the birds came back, the nature was coming back. And people were helping each other so we can't, to be completely honest, all we can do is what we can do. We can shout and scream, put stuff into practice and we've got so lots of natural resources where we live. Hydro, wind. There's going to be tidal stuff. But the infrastructure that we produce...our area produces 120% of the energy it needs just through little hydro screens. But all of that again is extracted from the area. We can do what we can do, but. it's up to government at the end of the day and legislation, I think.

**Barry Braun**

I'm going to agree here as well. When you're living in a soup it's really hard to swim away from the soup. You're in the soup right? And the government makes the soup. They set the tone of things and it's really hard. But having said that, I think that people can do individual things, so here we we've got communities that have set up their own windmill farms to generate local electricity. So those are community-based things, but it can't be widespread here because of the soup. There's a couple of loopholes. Very few. Three communities in all of Nova Scotia have been able to find where they can do this, but the



rest of the communities are blocked from doing things like that by the soup. I think also, you know it goes back to this story we tell ourselves and if we say there's nothing we can do or 'what I do doesn't matter' then that affects things and I think that people locally can contribute. They're not going to make a huge difference in their local, but when all the local communities everywhere do these things, it does make a difference.

### **Ceri Cunnington**

I think that message of the story we tell ourselves it's really, really important and I think it's one that I know our community, but even the whole of Wales we've always seen ourselves as not progressive, not ambitious enough, not important 'cause we've got this neighbour that is so powerful and so dominant that we've always been in the shade of it. But I think we are one of the most social entrepreneurship. We do have this incredible potential as a country, but as communities and then as a country.

### **Alex Swift (Interviewer)**

You mentioned the stories we tell ourselves. How important do you think education and stories are in how people see and behave towards their communities?

### **Ceri Cunnington**

Absolutely crucial from my point of view. School is part of our network of enterprises. We go into the school and tell stories about what's going on in the community. You know, local history is not part of the curriculum so local stories aren't told often enough, but the headmaster of the local school and the primary schools are parts of the work we do. Again, I come back, we're a small community so we're quite fortunate in that everybody knows each other. But yeah, that whole thing, we're developing community development courses now for young people, so we're going to be piloting these in September where young people have an opportunity to reconnect with their community. You know, the youth service has been decimated. Again, similar to what Barry was saying the government is not investing in youth work, so we have to take up the mantle which is OK if we got the resource of providing opportunities for young people.

### **Barry Braun**

From the Happy Community projects perspective, our real big measure of success is when a community changes its story from the inside out that there's no story given to them to say, 'here's your story'. But instead, through the process over several months, we start hearing them talk about a different story about themselves. That's our real big measure of success is when we are able to create an environment for them or help them.

We don't actually do anything. We enable people in the community to do stuff so when the people in the community are able to create an environment for themselves, that new story emerges out of the community. That's our number one measure of success.

But we also here in Canada and I'm sure you've heard some of this in the news because it's made international news. Our First Nations community here has been trying to tell a story for a long time and no one was listening to it until all of a sudden there's mass graves being found of young Indian children who have been treated very badly. And so, one of the things that the Happy Community project doing is actually working with one of the First Nations peoples, to help them shape the story and get it out to the world. And there's basically two threads to this. There's one - the white man story, so it's for a story going out to the adults to create awareness of what the truth is about the myths that we've created about personations people, and then invite them to be allies with the First Nations people. The second thing that we're doing is working with two very young, 17-year-old First Nation women who are creating stories to invite the youth who have been separated from their roots as First Nations people and bring them back into their foundational culture.

And so yeah, story is everything. We as humans tell ourselves stories all the time about ourselves and then we act according to those stories. We have a belief system, and the belief system is reflected in the stories we tell, and it governs our behaviour. And when we shift our story, then we behave differently. So, story is foundational to absolutely everything we do. And you can just look at yourself to see that that's true. What story are you telling yourself? And then look at your behaviour and see how it's consistent with the story you tell yourself. When that story that people are telling themselves includes the ideas, that we are socially connected, belonging, and caring across a diversity then we have the foundation for being happy. We are happy.