

Focus on Women Award Acceptance Speech - 2nd Nov 2023

What an honour to be in the same room as you guys. I'm humbled to share this stage with other incredible, worthy winners.

When Joslyn called me to tell me about this award, I was at home in Cardiff, Wales, in the UK.

I'd not long returned from spending 12 months with the **Matsiko World Orphan Choir** travelling across the US.

I had just returned from broadcasting my Saturday morning radio show without any sleep and was in the depths of jet lag from the West Coast when I received a call from an unknown international number and heard a lady talking with a funny accent, talking about this award.

It was a little surreal. I thought it was a crank call.

While overjoyed, I don't feel worthy to accept this award.

Because I'm the lucky guy who has gotten to know these kids and this wonderful, unassuming organisation, Matsiko Children International from Seattle, who have become family.

This project is all about them, these incredible kids. I'm just sharing their stories.

There are 600m vulnerable or at-risk kids in the world living in poverty at the risk of child trafficking. If they all held hands, they would circumnavigate the globe 14 times.

This project, "**Let The Children Sing**", is a docuseries sharing the stories and the journey of some of these kids from Liberia in West Africa who are giving a voice to these forgotten children.

We aim to use music and art to give 10,000 children the chance to go to school and receive a complete education.

In August, the kids flew back to Liberia after spending just under a year travelling 22,000 miles across 39 states in the USA, performing 215 shows.

After each show, the kids talk to audience members to try and get educational sponsors so their siblings, friends and communities can go to school and receive a complete education in their own country for the first time in their family's history.

The voices you hear in the music in the series are these kids.

All the camerawork in this series is filmed by the kids themselves.

The majority of the footage in Liberia is filmed by Moses, a former choir kid from the swamp community who is now a leader and is studying to become a lawyer.

Moses' mother was going to sell him for \$50 to people who said they would take him to the city where he'd go to school; she just needed to sign guardianship over to them. These people were traffickers.

What kind of loving parent wouldn't want their child, a child she can barely afford to feed, to succeed?

With legal custody, Moses would have become an asset and disappeared.

The Trafficking Industry is worth 150 Billion Dollars Annually.

Around 1.5 million new children are trafficked globally every year.

Of these kids, Interpol reported that 2,700 children were rescued in North and South America in 2021.

92 Arrests were made in North America, and approximately 8,000 children were rescued globally. That's 0.0053% of the children trafficked were rescued.

A poor return for the Billions of dollars spent on this problem.

The Director of Prosecution for Sex Crimes in Liberia told me education is the best measure to **prevent** child trafficking.

If a child goes to school, they educate their parents and create a ripple of intel across their communities, and the problem disappears.

This year, The Matsiko World Orphan Choir, without any significant fanfare, secured over 800 educational sponsors, removing these kids from the risk of trafficking and creating, through music, an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty.

This series, I hope, will highlight this work to a larger global audience and help add further resources and focus towards the **PREVENTION** of trafficking.

I also hope we can remove the image we've been sold about the poor, starving and needy African Children, which just isn't accurate.

These kids are rich with spirit, energy, happiness and joy and they are talented. The Matsiko World Orphan Choir shows what encouragement, empowerment and education can deliver.

Next year, when the Choir return for their 10th tour of the US, please don't tell anyone yet...!! They will be performing at the New Orleans Jazz Festival.

WHAT A STATEMENT TO THE WORLD.

Some of the poorest kids in the world, many of whom spent days crushing rocks to get half a cup of rice to eat, will be performing with some of the world's best and most respected jazz musicians.

They will be singing about The Spirit of Africa, They will be singing about The 15 Tribes of Liberia, and they are giving a voice to the 600 million forgotten children in this world.

That is the message of hope I'd like to leave you with.

Thank you for this award, or as we say in Wales Diolch yn fawr iawn

Thank you very much.