

An insight with the Chairman of the Board of Directors for JAZimbabwe

David William Birch is the Chairman of the Board of Director of JA Zimbabwe, a role he has held for 12 of the 18 years he has been on the JA Zimbabwe board.

David comes from an Insurance background spanning a period of over 50 years. Born 76 years ago David started his education in England and in 1952, at the age of 9 years, moved to Johannesburg South Africa, where he completed his education at St David's Marist College Inanda, at the end of 1960. "After completing my final year at Marist Bothers, at the tender age of 19 years, I got my first job at an Insurance Broking company – in those days tertiary university education was not a given and getting a job and earning money was more of a priority, at least for me anyway!"

David was married in 1968 and had two children – a son who lives in Dallas Texas with his family, and a daughter who lives at Ramsgate on the KZN South Coast. He moved with his family to Zimbabwe in 1970 and joined a local Insurance Broking company and progressed through the ranks – finally retiring from the position of managing director of Aon Zimbabwe and Regional Director of Aon Central Africa in 2007. He is still actively involved in the insurance industry as a director and consultant to several organisations.

David became involved with JA Zimbabwe through the late Eric Bloch who approached him and asked if he was interested in joining the board. He admits that it was not, initially, a passion that made him join the board but more an interest in the work that Zimbabwe did; but over time this interest drove him to realize that there is a massive demand for the entrepreneurial educational work that JA does - especially in Africa. "As someone who grew up in a privileged society, getting a good education and a good job was something we took for granted but of course that is far from the case for youngsters in most of Africa, and I realized I needed to help somehow - and at the end JA is doing an incredible job with that". In this context he mentioned that "JA Zimbabwe managed to reach almost 60 000 young people this year, less than the intended target due to the constraints in the operating environment, but all the same 60,000 youngsters are better off for their engagement with JA and that is a satisfying achievement". And that is his motivation – to give young people the opportunity to do something useful and worthwhile with their lives.

Despite the economic restraints in Zimbabwe, JA Zimbabwe has managed to make significant progress and contributes actively to the work of JA Africa and David complimented his fellow board members, and Phil Mlambo (Executive Director of JA Zimbabwe) and his team, for his exceptional work they do in this area - including fund raising and increasing our positive profile with the Government of Zimbabwe, who have recognized that school curricula must include teaching and development of commercial sense and entrepreneurial skills, to prepare youngsters for business and creation of employment opportunities when they leave school. "Phil and his team do an amazing job in very trying circumstances and I, and my fellow directors on the Board, are very proud of what they achieve".

David also spoke highly of Elizabeth Bintliff (JA Africa CEO) for her sterling work in raising awareness of JA in Africa and assistance with fund raising – "we work and interact closely with Elizabeth and she has been a great supporter of the work we do in Zimbabwe – the sort of encouragement we need as we cope with the economic difficulties that Zimbabwe has been battling for some time now".

At his advancing age David says it is probably time to start looking for a successor who will take JA Zimbabwe to the next level. "It is not for me to prescribe who that should be – that is up to the Board and Management to decide, but whoever the person is they must have a passion for helping youngsters to recognize their inner strengths and using them effectively – and they must understand and promote the benefits of digitization – that is the way Africa is going; and an area I have to admit is way beyond me!" he said.

David urged the youths to make the most of life's opportunities – "remember that education is the key to your future so embrace it, use it and enjoy it because it will hold you in good stead whatever you decide to do with the rest of your life". And last but not least "listen to elderly people and take heed of their advice – they may not understand some of the modern jargon or digital ways of communication but they have been there, done that, and have lots of T shirts to prove it!"

