

BBM Youth Support Award for Highland Dancing



Ava Tollard

2016/2017 Awardee

Recommender: NSW Highland Dancing Committee



My interest in Highland Dancing started at the age of 4 and at the age of 5 I began classes with Justine Daly School of Highland Dancing who still teaches me to this present day. My Highland Dancing has been a personal voyage for me. It has provided me with much strength particularly following the loss of my hearing when I was 14 years old. This disability challenged me, as I had just reached a Premier level in competitive highland dancing and the hearing loss affected my balance and the very technical nature of Highland positions. The most difficult thing was not being able to hear the music. I needed to learn about my Highland Dancing in a new way, how my mind and body could work together to continue to be successful in something I loved to do. I am very determined and with the encouragement of being awarded the BBM Youth Support Award 2016/2017, it has given me the amazing opportunity to broaden my dancing experiences. This award has enabled me to conquer my ultimate dreams and goals of travelling to the UK to dance, perform, teach, inspire and compete in Scotland. Without this award, I would not have been able to achieve this at such a young age.

Travelling to the UK I wanted to continue to be a dedicated Highland Dancer and hoped to be able to inspire other young children and teenagers also with a disability to keep thriving for what they are passionate about. I was hoping to gain life time experiences, a better understanding and skill for Highland Dancing and most of all I hoped to form relations between Australia and the UK.

Preparation

There was a lot of preparation required prior leaving for Scotland. My accommodation at the University of Stirling was booked and payed for months in advance. I contacted Dawn Fraser, a well-known and respected Highland Dance teacher who happily agreed to have me attend her dance classes which were held at Bannockburn and Bridge of Allan each week. I entered in many competitions and Highland Games before leaving as entries closed within a few weeks before the competition, although some entries at Highland Games competitions were accepted on the day. For future awardees for highland dancing who wish to travel to Scotland and compete I would highly recommend going onto the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing and the Toe-and-Heel websites. These sources allow you to gather competition entries and information. I also found talking to other awardees assisted with finding and entering competitions. My commitments were placed on a hand drawn calendar where some of the days on this itinerary were left free as I also wanted to be able to plan other activities when I arrived and settled in to Scotland. I found that this core preparation of planning my itinerary was invaluable and I referred to it every day. I also trained frequently prior to leaving, I had to make sure my body was fit and conditioned for the amount of dancing I would be doing. This training didn't just include attending all dancing lessons, it included trips to the Regent Street Physio, located in New Lambton, for advice and plans for strengthening my legs, ankles and general body fitness. I also hired a car with *Europcar* for the duration of my stay.

Accommodation

University of Stirling: 30.07.2017 – 02.09.2017

The first three days were very stressful. The initial accommodation that Stirling University assigned me to was unacceptable. It was not cleaned, run down and a residence that I couldn't stay in for many weeks as this was going to be my home base whilst I stayed in Scotland. This was a shock and was not the best start to my stay but I saw this as experience. Travelling to somewhere I had never been before and having only ever heard good things about the university from past awardees and family – It was something that I did not expect to happen. By the fourth day I was relocated to a different block of accommodation at the university - this was much more suitable for the next five

weeks. The flat I was relocated to was situated in Juniper Court this became my home base. My commitments were all in a radius from Stirling. For example, it was only a 40-minute drive to Edinburgh, 50 minutes to Glasgow, the Highland Games and competitions were between a 5 and 60-minute drive away and the dancing lessons were 10 minutes away also. For future awardees wanting to have Stirling as their home base. I would highly recommend staying in one of the newer accommodations such as Juniper Court or Willow Court. These flats give you a pleasant amount of space, the studio flat in which I stayed had its own bathroom and its own kitchen so I was able to cook my meals myself. The laundry at the University is conveniently located next to Juniper Court. The university grounds added another touch to staying there. I was surrounded by beautiful flora and fauna such as trees, a lake, swans, squirrels and rabbits just to name a few. The pictures show just how relaxing it was to take a quiet afternoon walk around the grounds.



Bannockburn and Banchory: 02.09.2017 – 08.09.2017

The accommodation at the university was only available during the student's summer break. So, I was lucky enough to have dancing friends who live in Bannockburn, Scotland and family that lived in Banchory, Scotland. This is where I stayed for the remainder of my time in Scotland.



Clifton Cottage was the house owned by my relatives that I stayed with. It was so sweet and made me feel like I was at home. I even awoke to a prepared breakfast!



Highland Games, Competitions and Dance Classes

Highland Games brought a whole new perspective on competing in Highland Dancing. I needed to get to the games early to set up all of the equipment I had to bring which included a tent, camping chair, dancing mats, costumes and then I needed to also register my attendance and be prepared for the competition. The tent was essential – it was a change room and protection from the adverse weather conditions. All Highland Games except one rained throughout the whole day, making warming up and staying warmed up extremely difficult. However, putting the weather aside, the whole experience of a Highland Game was so very surreal, dancing with the back drop of mountains was amazing. The first Highland Games I competed in, Dundonald Highland Games, had the most perfect weather. The sun was shining and I couldn't believe I was actually dancing in Scotland competing. The feeling I had is very indescribable and this was just the start of my BBM experience – this made me feel excited to be in Scotland. I placed in 4 dances picking up a second and three fourths. By chance I even met a dancer from England whose teacher taught my sister Lara, when she lived in London.



The games themselves weren't just about the Highland Dancing they were a way of celebrating the Scottish Culture. They included competitions in piping and drumming, heavy weight events and athletics, as well as the Highland Dancing. Being immersed in such celebratory for the Scottish culture was amazing. My second last competition, the Birnam Highland Games is where I happened to meet another Australian, David Woods, who was from Melbourne and competed in the athletics. It was great meeting him as we shared our experiences of Scotland and he even told me of the Highland Games being held in Melbourne at the end of the year which I have considered competing in since my return. The following are a collection of photos from Highland Games and indoor competitions. Competing with dancers I know from Australia, including Rebecca Smith and Angel Marston, was certainly a highlight.





Rebecca Smith and I at the Bridge of Allan Highland Games



The photos here were taken at an important competition I attended - The Andrew Carnegie Competition, located at Dunfermline High School. It was a competition that fundraised for the Arran Brown Rainbow Foundation, a foundation set up in 2011 in memory of Arran Brown who was born with a rare kidney disease. Being a part of this fundraiser was of great significance to me as it highlighted how Highland Dancing supports those with disabilities and/or diseases. I also received a placing in this competition.

All seemed to be going to plan until I got very ill. This was something I didn't think would occur and left me missing out on important competitions. It was a massive challenge and disappointment to my trip but I saw this as another part of my experience. The advantage of staying at the University of Stirling in this instance provided the convenience of a medical centre which was located on the grounds and directly opposite my flat. I could see Doctors, seek medical treatment and have check-up visits with much ease.

Nevertheless, the most successful competition I went to was held indoors and was my very last competition called the Lochside Monthly Highland Dancing Competition held by the Solway Highland Dancing Association. It felt like I was dancing back at home. It was located at a neat school hall; the people were so friendly and astounded I was from Australia and the competition itself so very well organised. For future awardees I would highly recommend this competition. I came first in all of my dances giving me an overall result of first in my section for both the national dances and highland dances. It was the most rewarding thing finishing on a high. I even met Louise Anderson who used to compete with my dancing teacher Justine Daly.



For my duration of stay in Scotland I had managed to compete in six competitions, four in which were Highland Games. I had planned to compete in four more but due to my sickness and one highland game being cancelled I was unable to compete.

As well as competing I also attended dance classes with Dawn Fraser. These were held at Bannockburn on a Monday and Bridge of Allan on a Thursday. Attending these classes added another experience to my trip where I worked hard and learnt more about myself as a Highland Dancer and what I needed to improve to become the best dancer I could be. Attending these also prepared me for the competitions I was competing in.

Also attending Dawn's classes was Laura Donlan, a Canadian who is the creator of the Highland Wellness and Strength Facebook page. This page is a service that provides Highland Dancers with videos demonstrating how to keep fit and healthy through the use of Laura's knowledge of exercise and stretching. I use this page myself at home. So being able to meet her was a huge inspiration for me as a Highland Dancer. We also competed together at the Stirling Highland Games.



Deaf Action

Prior to leaving for the UK I had alternating correspondence with an organisation called Deaf Action, about being involved in youth activities. This Organisation provided a network in the broader community in Scotland where I was able to share my story and my love of Highland Dancing to the youth. This was achieved by attending their outings, teaching them dance at their office in Albany Street, Edinburgh and making the most of every opportunity to learn more about the Scottish culture through their activities.

My first meet with Deaf Action was at the Newhailes Mansion, "A Palladian house fit for a baronet, originally built in the 17th century". I was able to meet just a few of the youth members at this occasion that were already intrigued about my dancing and disability. One of the youth members was a young boy who was deaf and played the bagpipes, named Finley. Bringing the two of us together we performed on the grounds right in front of the Newhailes Mansion, performing for members and youth of Deaf Action, public and the staff of Newhailes. This was the first moment I felt like I could relate to others who shared my disability. Finley was very nervous as this was his first-time piping for a dancer, so it was a new experience for him but just like myself was not letting his disability stop him from doing something he was passionate about. Following this, I had an impromptu lesson on the grounds and taught some of the children and deaf action staff some Highland dancing.

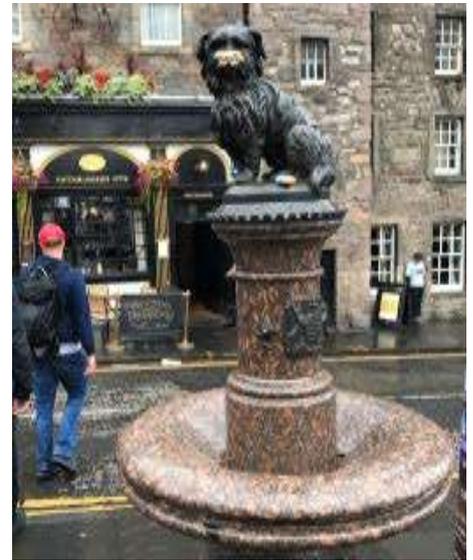


My second meet with action saw me at a very different place, Extreme Go Carting. Here I met an even greater amount of the youth group who I spoke to of my dancing, shared experiences and began to create much valued friendships. This youth activity involved me doing Go Carting which brought much joy to the night. At this activity, I met a young man who was deaf called Jia McKenzie who teaches and has been performing Ballet for 8 years. We managed to fit in a mini ballet and highland dancing lesson of course!





Alex Furneaux, the youth organiser and leader of Deaf Action, also gave me a tour of Edinburgh. Showing me Holyrood Palace, Grey Friars Bobby and Grey Friars Graveyard along with other historical monuments of Edinburgh, Scotland. It was a great opportunity to talk about the wonderful contributions Deaf Action has made as well as attaining the history of Edinburgh and seeing just how fantastic the city is.



Robert Ferguson Statue, Edinburgh



My farewell with Deaf Action was one I did not want to end. The day began with a highland dance lesson at the Deaf Action headquarters Edinburgh (live streamed by Deaf Action on Facebook). Prior to starting, Alex gave me a tour of the building, explaining the history and wonders it has brought the deaf community for over 180 years. Deaf Action staff including Alex joined my lesson with the youth and together we then performed on the grounds of Princes Street Gardens where the Edinburgh Castle was our perfect backdrop – a crowd gathered around, followed by applause. Other youth members joined us and we had a picnic for my farewell. It was a great day but of course had to come to an end by saying my final goodbyes to friends I had made for a lifetime.





I found my commitments with Deaf Action one of the most rewarding experiences I had when in Scotland and the biggest highlight. Being able to teach and share my story, the children and adolescents gave me such an unbelievable sense of pride and achievement. To see how determined, interested and amazed they became just from seeing someone like myself with a hearing impairment still achieving amazing things in life. Even though I am already a teacher of Highland Dancing here at home, being involved with such a great organisation has inspired me to incorporate

their philosophies into my plan of teaching and Highland Dancing and perhaps have a youth group for young children and teenagers with Highland Dancing lessons being a frequent activity.

Aside from my dancing commitments, I spent my free days either resting/recovering or exploring the beautiful wonders of Scotland. *Here is collection of photos from places I explored!!*



Falkirk Wheel

When I arrived in Scotland I broke a button off my kilt jacket! What are the odds of that! This meant finding a replacement. *Highland House* was in Falkirk, so whilst in this city I went to the Falkirk Wheel.



Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo

One of my highlights was sitting amongst the audience and watching the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. A goal of mine is to one year be part of the Royal Highland Dancing Team. I spent the day at Edinburgh Castle, on the Royal Mile and even bumped into Elizabeth Munro who was also going to watch the performance that night. It was amazing to watch live!





William Wallace Monument

Climbing all 256 Steps in the William Wallace Monument and reaching the top to see an amazing view of Stirling City.



Castles and Scottish Landmarks

Whilst exploring Scotland I found an abandoned castle and visited those that have been restored to learn about the history of Scottish culture. I also managed to get photos with many Scottish landmarks. This allowed me to learn more of the Scottish culture and truly immerse myself in its history.



Torchwood Castle





Robert the Bruce Monument, Bannockburn



David Stirling Monument, Doune



Andy Murray's Gold Post Box, Dunblane



Doune Castle, Doune



Stirling Old Town Jail



Stirling Castle, I found the museum in Stirling Castle very interesting. Being able to see how kilts were made in times of battle and learning that sporrans were made of real animal skins.



Crathes Castle and Garden's, this was an interesting castle ground as the garden itself was in close proximity to the castle. This is unusual as most gardens in the mid-18th-19th century were some distance away.



City of Glasgow

One of my full days off I caught a train to Glasgow and explored the wonders of another beautiful city in Scotland. I climbed the *Lighthouse* and came across a thistle hedge which of course I had to strike a highland position with.



Landscapes

Whenever I travelled to a highland game, competition, dance class etc. I could not miss the beautiful landscape that Scotland is. Travelling through mountains and passing sceneries made the nerves of competing disappear.



Climbing Arthur's Seat

These photos here capture one big challenge when I was in Edinburgh, Scotland – climbing Arthur's Seat. Although it wasn't dancing, it required much stamina. It allowed me to build on my strong determination for achieving countless things. The climb took 4 hours but the view at the top was amazing and climbing in my kilt made it that extra bit special.



Advice for Future Awardees

For future awardees I advise that you prepare for the unexpected. Certain occurrences cause change and being able to adapt to these changes is a very good ability to have. I was lucky enough to have my Mum with me the whole trip so when I became ill I was very fortunate. Further, for future awardees of any category my advice would be to be bold and take every opportunity you are given. You've been given an amazing opportunity to fulfil your most loved passions and conquer your goals thanks to the BBM. So, make every experience count and don't be afraid to take the new opportunities.

Those receiving the award specifically for Highland Dancing I suggest you research the competitions you wish to compete in well before your arrival and also take time to rest when you can. Highland Dancing requires much strength and endurance meaning maintaining your time of rest is essential. So be prepared for the unexpected circumstances, whether that be becoming ill like myself or getting an injury. Don't be afraid to take time to recover.

I cannot explain how thankful I am on receiving such a life changing award. I have been able to travel to the UK and truly inspire, teach and compete in Scotland. Something I thought was unimaginable. Thankyou BBM for making all this possible with your award the BBM Youth Support Award.

