My Bedford to your Bedford

Bedford: my home for 25 years of my life; the town I grew up in; the town my family has always lived in, the town where I have made friends for life; the town where I started my career; and the town that has given me experiences of people from all different backgrounds.



As some may be aware, I am the youngest ever elected Councillor to Bedford Borough Council at the age of 21, an achievement which I don't think I will be able to top for the rest of my life. The reason I entered politics at such an early age was because I wanted to give back to a town and community which has given so much to me.

Recently, one way I have been able to give back to Bedford is by visiting a number of other Bedford's in the U.S. In total I went to 4 different Bedfords in the U.S, and passed through a fifth; and visited members of the Bedford Democratic Alliance, which is a group containing liberal politicians from 15 different Bedfords around the world. Being able to visit other Bedfords in the U.S gave me the opportunity to understand the history, culture, similarities & differences between our towns. What I sore and learnt on my trip to these different Bedford's was that it really is a small world after all.

Now at this point you maybe thinking this is all so weird and strange to learn that there is many different Bedfords around the world, and yes, I was just as shocked to hear this for the first time. I first got introduced to the Bedford Democratic Alliance back in 2020 by Mayor Dave Hodgson. the alliance was formed by Andrew Mizsak, who is the Senior Democratic Leader at City of Bedford and Village of Walton Hlls, Ohio. Andrew is also Anthony J. Bellante Memorial Chairman and Director of Political Operations for Bedford/Walton Hills Democratic Party. Andrew started the Alliance because he knew that there were already a few connections between the different Bedfords around the world but nothing official or concrete. With the pandemic happening Andrew thought that there has never been a more appropriate time to form a group to communicate and help each other were needed. The Alliance started at a very peculiar time and is now a collective of very interesting and capable individuals, from all walks of life, with a wide range of experiences from all around the world. Not an alliance like the Avengers like most people first think when tell them about the Alliance, although I do think of the Alliance like that at times.



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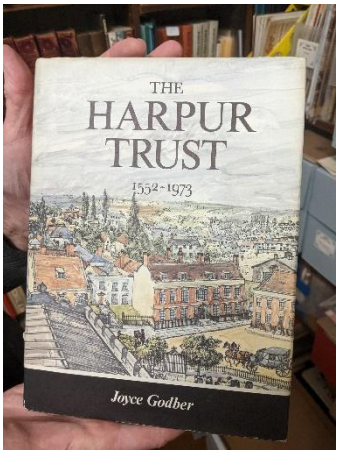
My visit consisted of 6 days traveling to different Bedford communities between the states of Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. The first Bedford that I visited was Bedford Township in Michigan, a small quaint town off the west cost of Lake Erie, neighbouring the larger town of Toledo, Ohio. A lovely area of the state surrounded by gorgeous countryside just like ours. This Bedford was not originally in the plan and was an impulsive stop off. For this Bedford myself and Andrew paid a

visit to the town's local government centre, where we met heads of departments and staff members who gave us an insight into the operations of the centre. It was a short but interesting first stop.

The following day we arrived in the City of Bedford Heights, but in Ohio this time, a Bedford which is the most like our Bedford in the UK. The first thing we did when we arrived was meet the heads of departments in a group meeting, discussing the towns general aims and objectives for the coming months, which was being chaired by Mayor Fletcher D. Berger at the City of Bedford Municipal Building. Listening in on this meeting was very interesting as I started to piece together similarities and differences that this local authority has compared to mine; financial recovery after the pandemic: stabilizing care homes and medical centres so people can get adequate health care: innovating transport links to tackle the climate crisis; and bringing more businesses to the town to increase employment whilst supporting small, local business. This discussion just grabbed my full attention and I thought: I must make the most of this moment and ask as many questions as possible.



The discussion quickly turned into a Q&A which ran on for a while because they were just as interested in hearing what I had to say as I did for them. What was meant to be a 30-minute session turned into a 1hr and 30 marathon. After this I was lucky enough to meet with Mayor Berger for a one-to-one meeting. It was a very enjoyable meeting discussing local policy, cultural differences, and the importance of the climate crisis. One thing that I really appreciated to hear from Mayor Berger was that 'No matter the political stance you take, you must work and lead within an authority to make sure the next generation has a lighter load to bear.' This hit home for me on several levels because that is why I and so many other people are in politics, to help make sure the future of your neighbourhood, town, city, or country has a brighter future ahead of it. After some informative and thought-provoking discussion, it was time to visit the Bedford Historical Museum. The Bedford Historical Museum is a unique gem within the township, showcasing the car industry which created a car culture within the town (something I am sure many people in Bedford UK can relate to), along with exhibits based on the schools and colleges, local businesses, and presidential visits through the years. It was a great experience and towards the end of my tour a book was handed to me from the international books section, 'The Harpur trust 1552 - 1973' written by Joyce Godber. At first, I was stunned to see the words 'Harpur Trust' and the traveller with-in me started to scream 'that's from my Bedford!'. Slightly confused and intrigued by this book, I started to have a read and learnt that a group of students from the Bedford High School made a trip over to Bedford UK to come and work with the Harpur Trust and to study about Bedfordshire in the UK.



This had completely taken me back for a moment as I thought my visit was the first time someone had travelled across the world to visit a sister Bedford, but it turned out people had been doing it for years. Moreover, to that point my guide told me that I was the first person from Bedford UK to come and visit the museum since the Duke and Duchess of Bedfordshire came and visited in the 20th century.

This really put everything into perspective that Bedford has had historical links way before I arrived, I am just very grateful to be part of all of it.

The next part of my day was a tour around the City of Bedford itself, visiting the equivalent of their high street and town centre, popping in and out of the local shops and meeting the locals. It was a great experience to have, and one thing I noticed was the diversity of the population, religion, and culture. From Italian delis and pizzerias to big grand and beautiful mosques neighbouring onto eastern European community centres. It just goes to show that its not just my Bedford in the UK which welcomes all walk of life.

This was now my 4th day on what I would call a 'wildly interesting and unique expedition' around the different Bedfords of the U.S, and today was the day to go to the big city Bedford. The city of Bedford is one of many in the state of Ohio but today I was visiting the Bedford City Hall to spend some time with Vice Mayor Vic Fluharty, City Manager Mike Mallis, public workers Superintendent Shawn Francis, and Law Director John Montello. A great group of individuals with such a wide range of experiences over several different years, all creating a very capable team which is working hard together to get the best results. Speaking to City Manager Mike Mallis was one of my highlights of the visit, as he is an individual who oversees a large amount of the operations that are carried out in City Hall. It's a massive responsibility which requires a large amount of dedication to making sure the work you do gets the best results for their residents. Speaking with Mike was an educational and an enlightening experience, we found common ground on the topic of the environment and climate change, discussing how to get all Bedford owned buildings such as the libraries to be carbon neutral, and to creating public transport links which have zero impact on the environment. The continuous exchange of experience, information and ideas motivated both of us massively as we both realized that we are on the same page on these issues, creating a sense of 'yes, we are on the right path to doing good things for our communities'.

Some people may describe these sorts of conversations as 'wishful thinking' (a term I hear too often) but I think that is completely ignorant to think this. It is necessary to think outside the box and these conversations are what local authorities should be having all around the world. This was very true for our conversation about EV charging points on residential streets. This was something Bedford Borough Council has been doing all around Bedford and it has worked brilliantly as it benefits so many residents and is creating a more sustainable transport infrastructure. This was something which Mike had just started working on and really appreciated hearing about our experience on the topic. At this point I want to just take a moment to express my gratitude to Mayor Dave Hodgson, the Liberal Democrats, and employees at Bedford Borough Council for also having this attitude of innovating thinking.

Feeling like I had really earnt my Bedfordian badge, it was time to start day 5, 6 & 7 and venture outside the Bedford's. First was a visit to the University of Akron to deliver lectures to two classes -Comparative Politics and World Politics and Government taught by Dr. Ronald Gelleny. This was my way of giving back on the trip, as I have previously done lecturing around the UK and wanted to do the same on my trip to be able to engage with the next generation on what its like working in local government in the UK, the impacts of Brexit and covid, along with the current political environment in the UK now. It was a very rewarding experience as the students asked several questions from what the hardest part of working in local government is to what the best part of living in Bedford is.



Next was a trip to the town of Parma to meet with the Mayor of Parma Tim DeGeeter and visit the Ukrainian Village in the town along with Matthew Diemer candidate for congressman for the 7th district of Ohio. This was an important part of the trip because me, Andrew, Candidate Diemer, and Mayor Tim DeGeeter used this time to go and communicate with the

Ukrainian community to give support where we could. Visiting the local businesses, churches and community centres was a real privilege and being able to work with in that team to give any assistance I could was one of the most rewarding things to be part of.



Towards the end of my time with Andrew it was time to have some fun and get right into the America culture, so off we went to the Progressive Field Stadium home to the Cleveland Guardian's baseball team who were up against the White Sox from Chicago. A big game as they are close rivals and with the White Sox being high up in the league, it was great to see the underdog Guardians beat them. After this was another impromptu diversion in our plan and it was to one of the Bedford fire stations. This was a lot of fun as we got to meet the team, check out the whole of the HQ and as you can see below, I got to sit in the fire truck, the child within me was very happy.

It really was a once in a lifetime trip, well actually hopefully not! Because that is the point of the Alliance, to be able to build a bridge between our Bedfords so there is a reason to visit. And this is just not something the Alliance wants to keep to them selves but to share with the rest of the communities no matter which Bedford you are from. This article is just a teaspoon of information about my visit, there was so much more myself and Andrew have done to help solidify relations between Bedfords and hopefully the future holds great things for the Alliance and all Bedfords. But we are only as able as the people that get involved, so if you think there is something to offer to help build the bridges then pleas get in touch.

Finally, I just want to end with a big thank you to Andrew. To be able to work with him was a real pleasure, his generosity, professionalism, and kindness has created a friendship for life for us both. Me and Andrew seemed to have crossed paths at the right time in our lives as we were both struggling with the loss of loved ones in the recent weeks before my visit. For Andrew he lost his mother who was an elected council woman at the city of Bedford council, known for the outstanding work she did for her community over 25 years. For me it was my grandad, someone who I was extremely close to, and he contributed massively to me getting into politics in the first place. With saying that, I suppose the bitter sweetness of it is that for me and Andrew we are just extremely grateful we got to have them in our lives as it brought us together; it started the Alliance, it made us individuals which wanted to help others, it made us want to help Bedford thrive as a town no matter which one it is in the world. This is what its all about, being able to create a relationship between Bedfords so the next generation can benefit too.



Cllr Jake Sampson sitting in the chairman's seat of the city of Bedfords council & Councilman Andrew Mizsak Sitting in his mother's council seat when she was in power.