



GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: CLAY BUTTEMERE, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF LINKACROSS

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LinkAcross CEO, Clay Buttemere © Nikola Ginevski, 2021

Mr. Clay Buttemere is an experienced leader of economic, healthcare, and community development in the Balkan region. He co-founded LinkAcross U.S. in 2009 and currently serves as its CEO. He is based out of the LinkAcross

office in North Macedonia and has a passion for sustainable, values-driven development that helps individuals, organizations, and communities to flourish.

Founded in 2010, LinkAcross Macedonia is a non-profit organization working in economic, healthcare, and community development in the Western Balkan countries by linking local and global partners. Can you give us a brief history of LinkAcross?

Together with the other co-founders, we founded LinkAcross in the U.S. in 2009 and immediately registered our first branch office in North Macedonia in 2010. We founded our branch office in Albania in 2019. As our name suggests, our mission begins with linking. We link local and global partners around development goals in the Balkan region. These partners are primarily from the U.S., North Macedonia, and Albania and vary depending on the activity, but have historically included business and healthcare professionals, schools and universities, businesses, healthcare institutions, faith communities, embassies, aid agencies, and other donors.

This diverse set of stakeholders links arms around specific development goals, such as supporting SMEs in the case of the GrowBiz project, which leads to the second part of our mission — development. Over our 12-year history, we have inspired volunteerism and helped communities build playgrounds, we have advanced children’s healthcare and community health education, and we have helped to start and grow microbusinesses and SMEs.

However, what I believe sets our organization apart is a strong focus on values and the “why?” behind the “what?” of development. We use the phrase “holistic development” to help describe that. We work with our partners and clients to explore together the core motivations and values below the surface that are driving outward behaviors and results. This of course happens at an individual level, so in our work, we emphasize identifying and developing long-term relationships with partners who

are interested in developing a values-led business or healthcare institution, for example. That leads me to our vision in all of this, which is to see individuals, organizations, and communities in the Balkans flourishing and fulfilling their incredible potential.

LinkAcross has been working in the Balkan region for more than 10 years and thus actively contributes to regional economic development through implementation of various projects. What are some of the LinkAcross milestones since its founding?

When our family first arrived in North Macedonia, our children were small, so we started with what was right in front of us — the lack of safe and fun places for children to play. That led to LinkAcross completing its first playground project, in partnership with our local preschool and community volunteers. Those initial playground projects taught us a lot about the local culture and context, including the importance of finding the right partners and the challenge of creating ownership and fostering sustainability. Although our focus did shift to business and healthcare development, we have nevertheless completed about a dozen of these playgrounds over the years. It's a lot of fun (and work) to build a playground in a week's time with a bunch of volunteers!

In the healthcare space, we partnered closely with the Children's Hospital in North Macedonia to improve both pediatric emergency and neonatal intensive care. We have provided training and mentoring of physicians by U.S. counterparts to introduce more advanced standards of care, as well as facilitated medical equipment donation. Thanks in part to our efforts, as well as other governmental and non-governmental actors, we have raised awareness around the development goal of reducing infant mortality and have made some positive strides, although there is still much work to do. One of the highlights of our involvement in this area has been to see the dedication and development of talented young pediatricians who are choosing to stay in their country to make a difference.

Finally, in the economic development area, we have focused on microenterprise development, and now SME development through the GrowBiz project. Regarding microenterprises, over the last six years, we have had over 100 entrepreneurs go through our phased microbusiness start-up program. This program provides comprehensive business training, planning, and mentoring services to entrepreneurs who have an idea but need some direction and assistance to get started. We have seen businesses as diverse as paper product manufacturing, math tutoring, online shopping, and legal services result from this project. Again, our greatest joy is the relationships that are formed with these entrepreneurs as we walk with them to take an idea from visioning, through planning, to launching and growing their businesses.

As one of the USAID EDGE grantees, together with your partner LinkAcross Albania, you are implementing the “GrowBiz” initiative aiming to help tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing businesses in North Macedonia and Albania grow and increase sales. What kind of activities are being implemented in order to achieve the desired outcomes?

We have assisted participating SMEs in several ways through GrowBiz. First, we have assisted through training. 110 participants representing 90 SMEs received training in the following areas: strategic management, market research, digital marketing, customer engagement, environmental and social responsibility, manufacturing efficiency, and export strategy. All training events were video recorded and archived in a digital library available to clients on the GrowBiz website.

Second, we have assisted through coaching. A group of 12 SMEs received over 200 hours of personalized business coaching from experienced U.S. business coaches. Together, clients and coaches developed and began implementing customized business growth plans. For our full clients, these coaching relationships were really at the center of the GrowBiz project, and I believe will have the longest-lasting impact from a business and leadership development perspective.

Finally, we have assisted through consulting and video production. 26 SMEs received technical assistance through GrowBiz in the form of video production and expert consulting in the areas of digital marketing, manufacturing efficiency, and environmental sustainability. The promotional videos serve as a very practical way to highlight these SMEs across various digital channels in both B2C and B2B models.

I emphasize the word assisted because our clients are the stars. That is how I have viewed GrowBiz — as an assist to set up their success.

In December, LinkAcross Macedonia organized a capstone event showcasing the results and lessons learned of this 17-month project. Can you tell us briefly, what were the key takeaways from this event, and what has Growbiz achieved?

The capstone event was one of the highlights of the whole project for me personally. Due to the times in which we live, we couldn't have everyone in the same space, but we were able to gather in-person with some of the clients and bring others in online. There was a lot of enthusiasm and energy at the event as we showed each client's promotional video that LinkAcross and GrowBiz helped produce and then interviewed the clients regarding their experience in the program.

Several themes stood out from the comments from the clients. First was the value of the particular mix of services offered through GrowBiz — training, executive coaching, industry-specific consulting, and digital marketing and media assistance. One client noted how some projects might focus on just one of these services, but it was the mix that drew her and her textile company to participate.

Another theme was the value of the coaching and the planning process. We heard multiple clients talk about how the coach helped them to think through strategy, solve problems, and be a sounding board for their business growth ideas. Although the plans were documented, it was the process of planning where the real value was created and captured.

Overall, the capstone event underscored how the assistance provided through GrowBiz has helped put businesses and their leaders in a stronger place today than when we started the project. Again, I think taking the long-term view is important. Perhaps some of the growth is measurable already, perhaps some of the growth will only become measurable in the months and years ahead. The business growth strategies and technical assistance we have provided through GrowBiz are important. But equally, if not more important, is the growth of the business leaders we have invested in. Their values and actions will continue to shape the future of their businesses, their communities, and their countries long after the close of this project.

As elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) across the Western Balkan countries. Considering your business expertise, what are some of the key actions businesses can take to better navigate the current crisis?

Undoubtedly, SMEs and societies at large are facing economic headwinds due to the effects of the pandemic layered on top of other historical challenges, such as workforce shortages and corruption. Perhaps the most important action to take is a renewed commitment to innovate. Management great Peter Drucker said: “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence — it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”

Markets and economies are experiencing dramatic shifts, and we must innovate and adapt or go extinct. The business models and strategies of the past will be insufficient to propel us into the future. Therefore, we must do two specific things. We must defend the core — of who we are as businesses and as leaders. This leads us back to purpose and values. And we must design the new — the new services, products, platforms, and partnerships that will address both the challenges and the opportunities of our new reality. To summarize, we must innovate around our core strengths. If we do that, I am convinced that, even in these challenging

times, we will grow businesses that are good for profit and equally good for the flourishing of people and our planet.



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