

Strengthening community through climbing

Ed Nhlane was born and raised in Lilongwe, Malawi. Today, he leads scouting missions for the non-profit organisation Climb Malawi, develops climbing routes and works closely with the surrounding communities. Nhlane started climbing in May 2019. Since then, he has established many routes in the country and published climbing guides. After Site Taulo in 1987, Ed Nhlane was the second Malawian to attempt to climb the Chambe West Face Direct route on Mount Mulanje. His attempt in May 2024 was hampered by poor weather conditions, forcing him to retreat from the mountain for safety reasons. He hopes to climb the longest vertical rock face again soon. As a board member, he works with Climb Malawi towards promoting climbing as a leisure activity, making it more inclusive and strengthening a socio-ecological vision for sustainable tourism – with an impact on local communities, education and environmental protection.

Please tell us a little bit about yourself.

I was born and raised here in Malawi. I am one of the volunteers at Climb Malawi. I joined in early 2018, just a few months after it started. At that time, I got in touch with a Canadian expatriate named Tyler Algeo, who had moved to Malawi with his family. As an expatriate, he observed a clear divide between locals and non-Malawians and wondered how people from different backgrounds could truly come together. As Tyler is a passionate climber, he built a climbing wall in his garden with all the equipment he had brought with him from North America. Initially, he had built it just for himself, but eventually he invited others to join him. This created a community that overcame various barriers, and soon people from all walks of life, both Malawians and immigrants, were climbing together. It was incredible. Most people thought we were crazy because it was a rather unusual activity for black Malawians to take up, but it was fun. Tyler's vision was: 'What if I could use climbing to overcome these barriers and turn it into a platform where people can meet?' And so, the people you met while climbing were no longer divided into categories. Everyone was welcome.

How has climbing in Malawi evolved to become more inclusive for the local community?

If you look at the history of rock climbing in Malawi, it has always been practised by visitors from Europe, America and Australia. They came to Malawi, explored this wonderful world, went on impressive climbing trips and then left again. In a way, there was a discrepancy between the potential we have for rock climbing and the actual attempt to establish it here. The climbing groups that formed between 1960 and 1980 consisted mainly of white people living in Malawi. But then more Malawians became interested in climbing, and the vision changed. We began to develop rock climbing in nature, and the response was overwhelming. It was simply about being in a space where you are not judged or measured by any standards. People felt liberated, and that's the same feeling I had when I first joined. Here, people who work as tailors and are often very poorly paid climb alongside people who have received the best education at the most expensive universities, some with doctorates; but no one knows anything about each other's background except that we all have a

common goal, which is to be friends. And that friendship, that partnership we build here, is the only thing that matters. We had a vision of a space where we could all meet and foster relationships and a sense of community. For Malawians who have limited means to travel abroad, this is a unique opportunity to experience the world without leaving the country; they can get to know different cultures. For visitors from abroad, it is the perfect opportunity to immerse themselves in the people, culture and language of Malawi, to connect directly with people and to experience local customs and cultures first-hand.

As Climb Malawi grew, more and more people wanted to join, but climbing is not a cheap sport. The biggest hurdle is often the equipment: a harness, climbing shoes and so on. Life in Malawi is hard, and you can't just tell someone they can participate without having the proper equipment. For this reason, Climb Malawi operates on a non-profit and donation basis. The suggested contributions are low, but everyone is welcome, regardless of their ability to pay. Members can earn their membership by doing small tasks at the climbing centre. Those who can afford more are encouraged to donate extra to cover costs and keep the community alive. This approach has made climbing more accessible and created an inclusive community where people can connect and grow through their shared passion.

That's a really nice mission. Do you have a favourite moment that has to do with climbing or with these connections where origin and background don't matter?

About a year ago, we considered what the next step for our community should be. We had some young participants in training who had reached a certain level of experience. So those of us in leadership positions took a step back to let things unfold and give the younger ones a chance to take responsibility themselves. We were very happy to see that they did not feel inferior just because they might not have had the same education or background as others, but that they confidently expressed their opinions: 'I think this and that is best for us.' This showed us that we had made a much bigger impact on these people's lives. They recognise that the value they bring is just as good as that of others. For example, it is often impossible for the average Malawian to attend university. And we have this space where people can talk to people who have a different mindset and perspective. And through all these connections, people help each other out of difficult situations, for example by supporting others with their tuition fees. No one asked them to do this, and they weren't obliged to, but they wanted to contribute to the community. It's about more than just meeting up, climbing and going home at the end of the day.

At Climb Malawi, you see women taking on roles that were previously reserved mainly for male colleagues or climbers. What methods do you use to promote gender equality?

Our goal is to use rock climbing as a tool for empowering women and developing the community, helping young girls take control of their lives. We have recognised that rock climbing can attract tourists. That is why we are developing climbing routes and training local guides. Even though we are not yet in a position to sell climbing travel packages, we want to ensure that the financial benefits remain in Malawi. It is important that local communities see tangible benefits from tourism, which is why we place great emphasis on building strong relationships and promoting local economic participation. This must also be one of our goals as we continue to develop our climbing infrastructure and community connections.

When I talk about building relationships to create a supportive environment, it's about creating a space where it's okay to make mistakes. An environment like ours helps those who may feel marginalised to do their best. We experience this every day when we climb together, sharing challenges and supporting each other. It's about trying things together, which calms self-doubt and highlights our unique strengths. At the beginning, we noticed that self-confidence varied greatly, especially between a girl from Europe and a Malawian girl who may have needed more encouragement. So we started offering women-only sessions to help those who were still feeling inhibited. At these meetings, women felt more relaxed and tried things without fear of judgement. There were strong catalysts in these groups who encouraged others to keep going. When even strong people fail, it shows that everyone has challenges, just at different levels. In our sessions, we climb together without formal instructors; everyone learns from each other. When I notice someone struggling, I can suggest a technique that has helped me. This broadens our understanding and allows us to share knowledge. It is encouraging to go from being someone who struggles to someone who shows others how they can succeed.

That's really enriching. One last question: what would a truly fair future look like for you and your community?

Our vision has always been that Malawians are the face of the community. Something we often see, especially in Africa, is that when you visit a climbing community in another country, you don't find anything there that truly represents that country. There are people who live there, but often without any real connection to the country. What does that say about what we are trying to achieve? Our vision has always been that we are happy to welcome everyone to our community. But we never want to create a situation where Malawians, for whose benefit the whole thing is being done, feel out of place. That's why it's also about creating an environment and a community where Malawians can take on leadership roles. Because at the end of the day, we need people who understand both the dynamics of the outside world and the local context, and who are committed to their country. In an ideal world, we have a community that is led by Malawians but is open to everyone. All the differences we have then become completely irrelevant.

Interview conducted by Henriette Meyer

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Website: climbmalawi.com ; **E-Mail:** enhlane@gmail.com ; **Social Media:** climb.malawi

The interview series “Globally just Visions of the Future” is part of “How Is That All Connected?”, a project by the Afrika Medien Zentrum e.V. that offers various educational programs on global interconnections. In the interviews, eight actors from different contexts and continents present their work and visions of the future. The interviews will be published in a brochure by the end of 2025. Six of the featured actors led interactive online seminars in September and October 2025, offering an international audience insights into their practices.

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