

Oration for Born Barikor
To be held at 3pm on Wednesday 17 July 2019
Delivered by Lisa Dodd Mayne

Chancellor

‘Turn up, tone up, get fit for free!’ This is the invitation of Our Parks, one of the UK’s most successful community sports initiatives, the brain-child of our honorary graduand, BORN BARIKOR.

Our Parks is a unique initiative, supported by local authorities, that brings free, professionally led, group exercise classes to parks and outdoor spaces; it aims to improve the health and wellbeing of local communities and to promote social interaction. It was inspired by Born’s own life experiences. Born was raised on a council estate in Tower Hamlets, one of London’s most deprived boroughs. Involvement in sport changed the course of his life: he trained with British high jump champion, Dalton Grant, who, Born says, made sure he ‘stayed clear of all the things people growing up on an estate would be involved in.’ Sport introduced Born to new places and people, and inspired him to go to university where he obtained a BSc in Pharmaceutical Sciences. These personal experiences convinced him that everyone should have the opportunity to take part in exercise, regardless of barriers like cost or convenience. Our Parks began to take shape while he was working as a Community Sports Officer in London.

He had very clear criteria: venues had to be easily accessible, so parks were perfect – everyone in London is close to a park; classes must be run by qualified and approachable coaches who knew how to make exercising sociable and fun, so that people were motivated to continue; mechanisms for booking classes must be simple and straightforward; above all, classes must be free, so that the programme could reach parts of the community like council estates and target the inactive. His business plan rested on the idea of using data, via a state-of-the-art website and app, to track attendance and analyse the demographics.

In December 2013, the head of Sports and Leisure at the London borough of Waltham Forest, Joyce Guthrie, agreed to try the scheme out. Our Parks was launched in March 2014, and now, in partnership with many local authorities and with Lucozade Sport, has some 55,000 weekly users and 500 coaches. Classes cover all age ranges and include football for three to five-year olds, tai-chi, ‘skatercise’ and skip yourself fit work-outs. Classes often reflect Born’s imagination and ability to draw people in: what seven-year could resist a Superhero Fitness work-out, a concept that sprang directly from his childhood love of Marvel comics? The programme’s use of digital technology has been instrumental in its success: ‘Everything we do,’ Born explains, ‘is built on user-validated content ... based on either the behaviour of our users or what they tell us.’ Social media is used to advertise courses: the programme’s users become its advocates and champions, spreading the word to others. Our Parks is established all over London and has expanded to Glasgow and Cambridge.

In 2017, we brought Our Parks to the Warwick campus. We currently host a weekly session designed to engage our University community in physical activity, supporting our vision to have the most active campus community by 2020. We are looking to expand the Our Parks offer here at Warwick through a Superhero session, targeted at our local community. Born – a Board Member of British Universities and Colleges Sport – has been a constant support, training instructors and promoting our sessions.

Our Parks has given thousands of people the opportunity to enjoy free, regular, supervised, exercise in a social context, improving the physical and mental health of local communities. This is all due to the vision, talent and hard work of one man, our honorary graduand, Born Barikor. It is a pleasure to welcome him here today.

Chancellor: in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*, BORN BARIKOR.