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CHILDREN CLEAN THEIR CLASSROOMS!

By
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'Soapbox Trips!' I clicked on the website. Soon a short-term mission team would fly to Tanzania. Just the ticket, I thought.

I applied for an application form and dispatched a modest deposit of £50. A royal blue T-shirt with logo and information booklet were sent by return. The main thrust of the project would be practical work at a school and a medical center. A visit to a game park was also possible.

On a sunny August morning I drove to Gatwick Airport to meet the team of seven. The leader was a middle-aged woman, short in stature, named Alison. She has a big heart and shared her aspirations to serve communities in Arusha. Her enthusiasm was infectious.

Most of the other team members were fifty years younger than myself, occupations ranging from high school students to a local government officer. 'Will there be a generation gap to bridge?' I questioned.

I need not have worried!

Sixteen hours later we were met at Kilimanjaro Airport by our liaison officer. We followed Peter to a bus which would carry us to a guest house. In reality it was a villa in its own grounds, smelling of freshly cut grass and shaded by blossoming mango trees.

A cook would prepare our evening meal each day. That apart, we would cater for ourselves. Each morning a mouth-watering array of fresh fruit was delivered from the local market: avocado, mango, pineapple.

My room was medium sized. The wardrobes and dresser were made of hard wood, but the bathroom was below expectations – part of the Africa experience.

I shared the room with Lewis, a catering student from Wallasey. Each morning he cooked breakfast for the team.

When the dishes were cleared away Alison announced the programme. Our first work site would be Kijenga Primary School, within walking distance. The headmaster, a stocky fellow wearing heavy framed spectacles, welcomed us to his office. After introductions he said, 'There are eleven hundred children here. Can you teach maths, English or geography,?' Intimidating, I thought. Thank goodness the lingua franca is English.

School starts at eight o'clock but first the children clean their classrooms and then

parade. A teacher takes them through a simple military style drill and the national anthem is sung.

My biggest surprise was yet to come. The teachers not on parade held a prayer meeting in the common room. Christianity is strong in Tanzania.

As volunteers, we didn't waste a single minute. During free periods we marked exam papers and engaged in social chitchat. Building relationships is important. Overseas work is about taking hope and encouragement as well as engaging in practical tasks.

Silvanus, a slight man in his twenties, led Alison and myself to a classroom. 'My dream is to study in the UK,' he said. We explained the wonders of the solar system to an eager class, after which we took them to the playground. One child was designated to be the SUN and other children were PLANETS. The teacher watched the heavenly bodies orbiting the sun with interest.

At lunchtime younger team members entertained the children with football and rounders, but blowing soap bubbles aroused most excitement. They jumped into the air to catch them.

Our next project was a serious undertaking, a medical outreach in a Maasai clinic. Two doctors from a local hospital accompanied us. The state provides free contraceptives but our team paid for antibiotics and vitamin pills.

It was a bumpy ride along unpaved roads, shacks on either side, heaps of evil-smelling garbage, banana trees everywhere. Women washed their soiled garments in a stream and hung them on bushes to dry.

Arusha was far behind and we advanced across flat country of withered maize stalks and cassava plants. Forty-five minutes passed before a crowd in vibrant colours indicated that the clinic was nearby.

Consultations were in progress when a nurse arrived. 'You can do admin. dispense medicines under supervision or weigh patients.' I chose the last. It was a demanding day that ended as the sun was lowering.

A second project with the Maasai was arranged by the Diocese of Mount Kilimanjaro. 'Can you paint the interior walls of a church?' an official asked. The place of worship was on a dusty plain in the countryside.

'John, will you oversee the project and make a risk assessment?' Alison asked.

Everyone beavered away and by late afternoon the job was completed. Peter, our liaison officer, pointed to a collection of mud huts. We would meet men clad in shukas – red or blue chequered blankets slung over their shoulders.

Another spin-off was seeing a Maasai bride in traditional costume. The woman was kept in a darkened room for four days while celebrations took place. We saw things

tourists rarely see.

Ten days had passed and our final stop was the Pippi House. Aristides, an Anglican minister, founded the refuge. It housed thirty-six homeless young women found wandering the streets. They told tragic stories of rape and sexual abuse.

'I used to comb the city centre looking for destitute women,' Aristides said, 'but now social services and the police send them here. The women go to school and are taught a skill.' Our team entertained their toddlers with toys, and taught the older ones to sew.

On the way back to the airport our liaison officer said, 'I think you have made a difference.' I hoped so. We had a responsible leader and everyone had focused on their jobs, approaching them with unbounded enthusiasm.

Soapbox Trips gave new experiences that were initially outside of my comfort zone, but I was thankful for the challenges. My life was enriched and I now identify with those suffering at the bottom of the economic ladder.

I can't wait for my next trip, and my colleagues voiced the same thought.