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## **Susan Board**

**Emmanuel Advice & Care Centre, Port Elizabeth, South Africa**

**November – December 2011**

I flew out to PE, South Africa on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2011, arriving on the 14<sup>th</sup> where I was met by Nelson from Calabash. Like all the Calabash staff, he was immediately welcoming and friendly. He drove me to Mickie's in New Brighton, my home for the next 4 weeks. Mickie is a teacher and so was not home but Tenji, the live-in help, and 'Mother' were there to greet me. New Brighton is an established township near the centre of PE and relatively comfortable in comparison to other newer townships; Mickie's home is a little palace.

My placement was with the Emmanuel Advice & Care Centre which is located in Kwa Naxolo, a township to the far north-east of the city, maybe about 12km out; PE is a city that sprawls geographically over a vast area and there is no real cultural centre.

Prior to leaving the UK, I had read previous volunteers reports, read around on the web about HIV in South Africa, see: <http://www.avert.org/aidssouthafrica.htm> and had started reading Nelson Mandela's *In His Own Words: From Freedom to the Future*; this is a collection of his speeches and I have been reading it on and off ever since. Paul, at Calabash, had alerted me to the fact that Emmanuel had been experiencing a bleak year before I set out; there had been 7 months with no income, activities had ceased and morale was low. Fortunately, funds had arrived shortly before I got there so this was a huge relief; for me, personally, the pressure of a being a beacon of light, bringing encouragement was not so enormous.

I met Paul on my second day; first I was picked up by Mungo of Calabash and given a tour of the city including a brief visit to Emmanuel before arriving back at the Calabash offices where I also met the lovely Assanda, who keeps everyone's diaries (and who later helped me make my holiday bookings). Paul went through with me practical details – such as personal safety – I was given a local mobile and he stressed how much this placement should positively contribute to both my own and Emmanuel's benefit. I was taken home. I wrote in my journal that day that I felt completely looked after, relaxed and ready.

My time from thereon followed: Breakfast about 7.45 prepared by Tenji who would also have made me a packed lunch. Pick-up about 8.15. Xolani was usually my driver and we'd chat, laugh and call out answers to the radio quiz as we travelled up to Kwa Naxolo. We'd arrive at Emmanuel about 8.30; occasionally we might be able to pick someone up walking to the site; on a few occasions I went shopping at a supermarket before. On arrival, I would go and greet Aunt Nellie and Pumesa in the first children's hut; everyone would gather here and have a cup of tea and chat as the day began. The crèche children would be expected to come in, sit and quietly wait. I found this odd and, if we

were sitting outside, initiated play outside or, if we were inside, found books, hand puppets, etc to give each of them so that they were occupied. There were not many crèche children whilst I was there for 2 reasons: some had dropped away when Emmanuel had barely got through the year and the crèche had opened sometimes intermittently and it was coming up to the Xmas summer holidays so older children were able to look after younger children at home.

The carers would invariably arrive between 9 and 9.30 and so the office could be opened and the day begin. Usually I would go out with one or more of the carers: Tocho, Sarah, Anita, Tembeka. Estolene is the project manager and spent a lot of her days chasing paper trails for funds. Anna-Lise is the administrator. I also met Pastor Benjamin Read, who is a trustee and seemed to come on days when a cheque was needed.

I usually spent the morning walking through the township with one or more of my new colleagues, visiting clients in their homes, chatting as we went. Many families lived in cramped makeshift temporary homes built of tin, bricks or wood whilst their existing breeze-block homes (built shoddily only 5 years previously) were being demolished and a new, small home was being built. The township was a large building site: roads were pitted by lorries - my 'daily massage' according to Xolani! - trenches for drains, sand piles that the children played in and, depending on the weather: mud or dust everywhere. Plus, open sewage running in streams in which pigs rooted, rubbish littered the landscape for teams of female litter pickers and road sweepers worked tirelessly to bag the community's rubbish which would then be picked open by birds and dogs and it would blow in the wind again and get caught on the wire fencing. This endless and perhaps futile endeavour sometimes seemed to embody the hopelessness of the place: 'abandoned' by first world standards of sanitation and welfare evident in other areas of the city.

This is a personal reflection of my sadness that there still exists a gulf between the promise and tenacious fight of Mandela and the first wave of ANC government to make fundamental changes to improve the lot of impoverished South Africans and the minimal trickle-down effect on the ground.

On the other hand, I hold huge respect and admiration for the persistence, openness and warmth of all the staff at Emmanuel who care enormously for their neighbours and the people of the community. They visit clients, giving comfort, solace and encouragement.

There is a great deal of stigma still pervasive in the community towards those who may be diagnosed as HIV+. Many clients hide their status, if they acknowledge it themselves, and I heard terrible stories of cruel abandonment and others' generosity. Not only is poverty overwhelming but it adds to the chronic ill-health of many: TB and diabetes is also common. There is one clinic in the community and no free transport. Alcoholism and associated violence is rife; whilst I was there, there was a 15-day highly publicised national Campaign Against Violence towards Women and Children. Whilst I was there in Kwa Naxolo, walking about and visiting people with Tembeka, Tocho, Sarah and Anita, I never felt unsafe, although I heard dreadful tales of knifings and murder. I was welcomed with curiosity and genuine warmth; it was really appreciated when I learnt to say: 'Hello, how are you? I'm very well. And you?' in Xhosa.

**Note from people and places: volunteers' safety is vital to us all.**

**During orientation meetings, Calabash provides firm and useful advice about issues of personal safety and also provides volunteers with a local mobile phone or SIM card to make contact at any time. As Susan found, Emmanuel's carers are highly respected in the communities where they work – walking and working together ensures that volunteers also feel safe in the township during their working days.**

**The homestay mothers, such as Mikie, are also well-known and highly respected in their communities and provide additional advice about their own neighbourhoods, often including volunteers in their own lives – going shopping, going to church, visiting friends etc.**

Kwa Naxolo, and Emmanuel as representative of its community, is mixed which is a little unusual in South Africa, that is, it is 'black' and 'coloured'. The indigenous 'blacks' speak Xhosa, as did Mickie and her family, and the 'coloured' people speak Afrikaans. Thus the carers allocated their clients according to language: Sarah and Anita spoke Afrikaans; Tocho and Thembeke spoke Xhosa. They all understood each other's native language but did not necessarily speak it. English was a common language that they all spoke to a varying degree. I found that I had to listen very hard sometimes for one thing they all did was confuse pronouns: he/she/they. Thus I was often not sure if they were discussing a male/female client or their son/daughter, etc. At the end of visits, we would return to the office for a much needed drink and write up reports; there seemed to be quite a resistance to doing this and I think this might have been because it meant writing in English; Tocho and I got into a habit of doing these very easily and speedily – we would share my lunch, she would say something like: You know the client who... And I would reply: Yes the one who... you advised her to... And, thus I would fill in each client's report in a few minutes.

**Note from people and places: skills-share in action!**

Sometimes in the mornings, we would make the long walk to the clinic, to sit and wait for a prescription – this would take all morning. Occasionally we would stop off, if we were passing, the George Botha Community centre, where Thembeke and Anita used to also work in the kitchens; here lunch is cooked for anyone who needs it in the community. Lunch used to be cooked everyday by Umbuthu and Patricia at Emmanuel for the local children who would arrive with a plastic container.

Twice, there were monthly support meetings for clients, which I sat in on. I gave two workshops in counselling skills (person-centred counselling skills and existentialist therapy; handouts are in a folder filed by Anita) to the carers at Kwa Naxolo plus the carers who came from the satellite sites of Boysen Park and KleinSkool. After the first workshop and from the beginning of the third week, I started giving individual counselling sessions to those carers who voluntarily wanted to be counselled. The carers are members of their community and have lives that are complex and challenging themselves. This is besides the pressures of caring for their clients and of being seen as community role models.

Each week, Paul visited to meet with me and the team, to oversee that we were all getting on and principally that I was constructively contributing to and being utilised by Emmanuel.

**Note from people and places: weekly meetings with the local project management team and the project are a vital part of all volunteer placements – problems are addressed, future plans are made.**

Around 1.30pm the teenage OVCs would start arriving; at the beginning of my time there it was later for they were still at school but once school holidays arrived they started arriving earlier. I never formally structured these times; we gathered in Pumesa's Hut and talked; in the end, we wrote collaboratively a play which they practiced and performed on the residential trip and at the leaving party (copy in the folder).

My day would end at 3pm when Xolani would pick me up; at 1pm on Fridays. Usually I'd arrive home about 3.30 unless I asked to be taken to the Calabash offices where I could use a computer to email and make our holiday arrangements. I enjoyed this extension to my day for it meant that I was free to make my own way home, once Assanda had shown me the right queue – to have a mini adventure riding in a taxi van back to Dora Street and walking down my street alone. Again, I felt perfectly safe – a curiosity of course as the only white person squashed in the van. I was proud when the taxi 'conductor' recognised me! Otherwise, I would go back and sit, TV on, with 'Mother' and Mickie, whilst Tenji buzzed around solicitously. Often there would be visitors: Mickie's nephews and brother came in every evening for their dinner and friends would drop by. I found the sitting around difficult. There was only so much writing of my journal, reading and listening in of

conversations that I wanted to do. I did reflect upon it being a good thing for me perhaps for I am not used to aimlessly sitting around. But I chafed at the inactivity. I had taken my running gear but knew immediately that that was not an option. I did eventually run on the seafront at Summerstrand – perfect! I did not do anything touristy, apart from a Saturday morning visit to the Red Location Museum, for I was saving that for when my son came out.

Whilst there, I went on the annual residential children's trip. In the lead-up to the days, I was surprised by the lack of discussion about it – I had expected there to be a meeting to work out the timetable of activities. Instead, I found asking for information difficult and resorted to asking on behalf of the children.

**Note from people and places: these annual trips are looked forward to and relished by children and staff alike, and although forward planning is not much in evidence, everyone tends to 'muck in' and make the trips work.**

On Thursday we left eventually in 3 mini-vans to a residential camp out of the city: 9 adults and 31 children? (This was only discovered when I was giving out the dinners.) It was such a relief for me as well to go the countryside and the location was beautiful; it was quite basic but absolutely great: as soon as we arrived, we all spread out onto the green lawns which ran into hills and forests. I had bought games equipment that the children could play with: bats and balls, etc. The children were fed enormous meals and relished being away.

The following day, Saturday, was the crèche children's graduation. A marquee had been erected in the yard and Aunt Nellie and Pumesa had decorated the sides and tables with swathes of material. They had made the space beautiful; everyone was dressed in their best; it was only a little late in starting whilst the sound system was tested. The ceremony consisted of singing, prayers, dancing, snacks, performances by the OVCs and the awarding of the 'diplomas' to the graduands; the local secondary school head teacher was the guest of honour and she gave a rousing speech aimed at both the parents and the young people at the event. It was a reminder of the inspirational and positive significance of Emmanuel and its staff.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> December my 18 year old son, Ben, flew out; I moved to the Beach House in Summerstrand where we both stayed – a gorgeous little hotel, run by the very friendly Anthea. On the first day of his stay, Ben, after a morning tour of the city, joined me and everyone at Emmanuel for an afternoon of partying; I wanted to hold a party for the teenage OVCs, it was Estolene's birthday and my leaving party. The following day was the staff Xmas party held by the beach at Bluewater Bay; Ben came along to this too. This was my final day with Emmanuel.

**Note: Post placement holiday time – arranged by Asanda at Calabash**

Ben and I stayed for a further two weeks holiday, visiting Addo Elephant Park, Schotia private game reserve – with Calabash, going on a Raggy Charter boat trip in Algoa Bay – to see the most northerly colony of penguins, playful dolphins, but sadly we were too late in the season to spy whales; we then went on a 7-day Baz Bus trip along the Garden Route – towards Cape Town, staying in backpackers at Knysna, Plettenberg Bay and Storms River. We had a fabulous time in these beautiful places doing many tourist activities such as surfing, eating local oysters, horse-riding, zip-wiring through a forest canopy-a completely different existence to my previous 4 weeks!

Overall, I had a wonderful time at Emmanuel and in PE. I felt supported by Calabash and valued by everyone at Emmanuel. I was warmly embraced – literally and figuratively. I laughed and cried with my new friends there. They provide an invaluable service in very challenging circumstances and against so many odds. The future for the organisation looks likely to become even more challenging because of funding – forget Jacob Zuma's announcement made in PE on 1<sup>st</sup> December, World Aids Day; we never got to the rally – another lack of clear communication and organisation. On the ground in this grass-roots organisation where local people make a difference, political

strategies needing to traverse bureaucratic labyrinths make little inroads. I hope that future volunteers can continue to build up the capacity of the carers; they are capable and generous people giving to their community.

I would recommend this volunteering experience. Nevertheless, I recognise not everyone would want to do this; I was described by many of my friends as being brave. Yet, I felt freed of my personal responsibilities and anxieties. I went with an open attitude wanting to establish bonds of trust and friendship before I started doing activities and I think I did this.

Although I felt restricted at Mickie's, she provided an easy-going home where I felt very much at ease. I am vegetarian and it seems South Africans are big meat eaters, yet she catered for me with good humour, even becoming vegetarian at times – until the next meal! However, Tenji was never going to fatten me up, despite her best efforts, on lots of soft vegetables! I was invited to join in whenever there were happenings, such as a group of us marking her students' Xhosa exam papers – it was fun! – going to the local shopping centre to choose jewellery with her and her daughter, going to a catholic church service with friends – and not Mickie, to my surprise! Moving to the Beach House with Ben at the end of my stay was wonderful too: a shower! Unlimited breakfast with real coffee! A chance to go out, just to walk in the afternoon! However, I think if I had stayed there the whole time, I would have felt a fraud and missed out a huge dimension to the whole experience.

**Note: some volunteers find that home stay during the working week and guesthouse for the weekends offers the best of both worlds – this is certainly an option – please ask if you'd like to find out more.**

Throughout writing this report, it has been difficult to identify one experience as my best; one significant, memorable occasion was one where I'm going to leave out names. One carer and I had gone to visit another of the carers who had taken some time off work for her brother had been murdered in gang violence against her family. On leaving, the visiting carer and I held hands, walking away, taking the short cut across the rough, rubbish strewn land and just ended up screaming in the wind: Sjo! with tears running. I came to like this phrase – it is used when words fail to express complete amazement and bewilderment, I think.

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Thank you.**