

Note from *people and places*: this volunteer's placement was designed specifically for them – they went through our full matching process, as we've been doing with you. The placement report indicates their particular skills and experience – yours may be similar or completely different – your own placement will make best use of **your** experience and skills. Every volunteer is different – in what they give and what they gain. Reports from previous volunteers serve to give you as good a picture as possible about the project.

If you have any questions about any of the detail in this report please do not hesitate to contact me at [kate@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk](mailto:kate@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk)



**Tony Jones**

**Placement date – 9<sup>th</sup> October to 5<sup>th</sup> November 2011**

### Preparation

I was placed at the WB Tshume Primary School in the Kwazakhele township in Port Elizabeth. It was initially intended that I help with the teaching of English and Drama in Grades 7, 8 and 9. In the event, I also taught Science to Grade 9.

Before making the decision to apply for the project I spoke at length to a volunteer who had worked in PE the previous year supported by Calabash and People and Places. As soon as I made contact with Kate at P and P I was put through the 'selection' process which I thought sensible and thorough.

There was quite a long period between joining the project and departure and I was contacted by Kate from time to time to 'keep me in the loop'. As departure approached I was sent a lot of information about the project, the school, the curriculum and the culture, all of which I found most useful. I was also sent a copy of the curriculum which had marked on it the areas I was to cover.

I also contacted by e.mail other volunteers, some of whom had worked at Tshume. All of them replied. Their comments and advice were invaluable and I would recommend any volunteer to do the same. The volunteer reports sent by P and P were obviously invaluable.

### On Arrival

I was met at the airport by Xolani who was my main driver throughout the stay. We got on very well and he always got me to the school for assembly. The provision of a driver is absolutely essential. I don't know of any other way in which I could have got safely to the school.

Note from *people and places*: the placement costs in PE include daily transport to and from the project

I was left to rest at the hotel for the rest of the day (Sunday) after being made very welcome by Anthea, the owner of the 5th Avenue Beach House where I stayed. On the Monday I went on the orientation tour with Xolani and Monga. It was very thorough and interesting. I was keen to visit the school and was made most welcome when the staff gathered and sang me a welcome song. I met Rita, the programme director, Zolenka, the Drama teacher and Leo, the Maths teacher teaching Science.

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I happened to mention in passing that I once taught Science. In no time my timetable was rewritten to include 6 periods of Science with Grade 9. At first I regretted getting involved with Science as I had not offered it as a subject and had not taught it for 20 years. However it turned out to be a good thing for reasons I will explain later.

I met Paul from Calabash for our orientation meeting. I immediately liked his pragmatic and realistic approach to the project. His support then and through the placement was reassuring and the weekly meetings were most useful.

Organisation and communications from P and P and Calabash were excellent at all times. I always knew what was going on and the administration of the project was very good. Transport was excellent and always on time. Information on the area and the culture was good. The provision of a cell phone with preloaded numbers is an excellent idea.

What both P and P and Calabash did particularly well was to encourage me to be realistic about what I could achieve in a month. I did not go to Tshume with any grandiose ideas about making changes. The philosophy of small steps is the right one.

Honestly it is difficult to think of anything much that could have been done better. I was on my own in PE, there being no other volunteers at that time, but that was just bad luck and in the end it was not a big factor in my experience. I am a quite self-contained person when necessary.

### My work at Tshume

I taught English and Drama to grades 7, 8 and 9 and Science to grade 9.

#### *Science*

The school has no Science specialist, no text books and no equipment. This made the teaching very challenging. Double periods of 1 hour 40 minutes made me try to be creative in trying to do things with chalk and talk and photocopied sections of text books. The students were very tolerant because this is what they are used to but teaching about acids and bases with no chemicals and test tubes is against everything I am used to. However I had some success and at the very least was able to give the students some specialist teaching for the month before their matriculation exams. The work on Evolution and the environment seemed to go down particularly well and we had some good discussions.

I was usually on my own in the classroom but that didn't bother me. In Science I don't think I made any permanent input to the school but at least I think these students benefitted.

#### *Drama*

The Drama was 'team taught' with Zolenka. We had great fun working together with improvised group work based on life skills. The ideas for the pieces came from me and I hope they will continue with them. Standards were quite high and they have a good Life Skills and Drama teacher in Zolenka. I left her with a book of Drama games to try in the future.

#### *English*

The bulk of my time was taken up with English. I taught all of Grade 9's English, mostly on my own. English teaching is based far more on formal grammar than in the UK. I am glad I took a couple of grammar books with me! I did not feel that I could move far away from the precise tasks I was given related to the national curriculum, especially with Grade 9 as they were approaching their examinations. I did a lot of work on sentence construction and types which I do think was useful to them. However, I also did some work on types of writing and we had some great discussions and debates to improve their oral skills. I thoroughly enjoyed working with Grade 9.

They gain a lot in English from listening to an English person speaking. Although by Grade nine their technical English is mostly quite good, their pronunciation does not always match it.

#### *Small groups*

For four days a week I spent the last two periods (period 6 was often cancelled by early closure of the school) with a small group of 6 students from each of grades 7 - 9. These were identified by Rita and I

as people with reading problems. I tried to identify their reading issues. They enjoyed reading out loud in a situation where nobody was a good reader and they were less self-conscious. There is a wide age range in each grade as students can be kept down and some of them do not get to school until quite late in their lives. There were a number of effectively non-readers. They had little or no phonic skills and almost no word recognition. One of them was seventeen!

During the month some students reading definitely improved, largely through a growth in confidence.

As an experiment I heard children reading in both Xhosa and English. Those with poor reading were poor in both - it didn't seem to be just an English problem.

#### *Resources*

I left a list of assessments for these children with the school. I am not holding my breath in the hope that something will happen - they simply do not have the time resources. But at least the school is now aware that there is a problem with these particular children and that some of them cannot read at all.

I left with Rita two very good English grammar books which they can photocopy. Photocopying is illegal in SA but nobody seems to care and the publishers know that it goes on. Text books are far more expensive than they are here. I saw the annual budget for the school!

#### *How my donation was spent*

**Note from *people and places*: the placement donation included in the costs is a 'ring fenced' amount, solely for volunteer input to the project, in discussion and agreement with the project.**

A year before I arrived two classrooms were vandalised. The ceilings were down and the electric cable had been stolen. The whole block was without electricity. Mr Sali, the principle, saw no prospect of them being repaired as there were no funds. One of the classrooms had been used as a Drama studio. I decided to use my volunteer contribution to do the repairs. Needless to say, it wasn't enough and I made up the difference myself. I consider myself fortunate in being able to do this. To me it was the cost a meal for four in a really good restaurant - for them it was two more classrooms. Puts things in perspective, doesn't it? The work was almost completed when I left.

I was pleasantly surprised that the school was quite well furnished, there was adequate stationery, most of the students had writing equipment and some even had calculators. The classrooms for the younger children were bright and there were good displays (a lot to do with previous volunteers). The children cleaned the school themselves on Friday afternoon - I approve of that! There was a nutrition programme being developed to give some of the smaller children a good midday meal, at present on three days a week. A lot of the food is donated and the work is done by parent volunteers from the township. The food was good - I tried it!

The school looks a bit scruffy because there are no hard playing areas - just mud and grass. There is no playing field but there is a project to provide one when enough money has been raised.

Tshume is a happy school. The children are well dressed in uniform (even though some of them still live in shacks). Behavior is very good among the teenagers. They are polite, respectful and never confrontational - how refreshing! The staff were very friendly and welcoming. I loved their singing every morning before we started. They complained a bit but that is endemic in teachers everywhere. Mr Sali, the new Principal, is a lovely man and cares deeply for his school and students. There was a difficult period between Principals but it has clearly come out of that now.

I didn't have any real disappointments except that I have to accept that any difference I made in a month would be small but I knew that and others will chip away in the future. Also being the only volunteer in the area at that time.

**Note from *people and places*: we of course discussed with Tony the matter of his being a lone volunteer – and as you can see, he understood this and was content with the situation.**

## My highlights

- My visit to the township with Rita, 14 fifteen year old boys (my bodyguard), and three policemen. I think three was overkill but they wanted to show their faces. I was invited into the shack of one of my pupils. I also met and chatted with the local Sangoma (witch doctor).
- Assemblies where the children just cannot keep still when they sing.
- The choir and their stunning singing - all those teenage baritones and bases!
- The most delightful children I have ever taught - I miss them terribly.
- Being hugged all the time by teachers and students alike.
- My farewell ceremony which reduced me to a wreck, especially when the choir sang to me and the Grade 9 students did a special piece of Drama which they had made up themselves.
- Celebrating my birthday with Xolani in a Shebeen.

I would recommend volunteering to others because you learn about the people as well as the place. How can something be bad when you get such a lot out of it and the school enjoys having you there so much. It's not easy and I was very tired in the evenings but at the end of it you really feel that you have done something worthwhile.

Don't do this if you are not flexible and broad minded and prepared to totally accept the cultural differences. South African township schools are far less structured than in Europe. Lesson times are 'flexible', school often ends early and it may seem chaotic at times and they haven't heard of Health and Safety. If you can cope with that you will love it.

## Accommodation

The 5th Avenue Beach House is very comfortable. Anthea, the owner, makes you very welcome and often has 'Calabash' volunteers staying there. She supports the project. My huge room and bathroom were always spotless and Josephine, my room maid, did my laundry for £5 a bag. Breakfasts are great and freshly cooked. They serve dinner four nights a week. There is no choice but the food is home cooked and delicious. On the other nights I either ate in one of the restaurants in the Mall five minutes away, or went to Gingers on the Boardwalk or prepared a simple meal in my room ( there was a microwave).

To be honest, I didn't do that much in my leisure time. When I got home from school I just wanted to relax by the pool and read a book. TV is pretty dire but you can find movies to watch in the evenings. At weekends I went for long walks down the beautiful coastal paths and board walks, went to the beach or relaxed on my terrace. I went to Port Elizabeth once - pleasant city but not a lot there. I didn't go to sightsee. I have done Safari and Elephant parks before. I would like to have flown to Capetown but there just wasn't time.

There were many German business people at the hotel and I had some very nice dinner companions. By the time we had finished chatting I was ready for bed. I had to be up at six on school days!

To sum up, this has been one of the most significant experiences of my life. Tshume has a place in my heart for ever. Will I go back? Who knows - not out of the question. One thing is for sure - my long haul holidays are all going to be somewhere in Africa for quite a while.

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Thank you.