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Sonia Millership – March 4th to August 27th 2015

Emmanuel (2 days a week) and Emafini (3 days a week)

The opportunity to volunteer felt like such a gift to me, I had an amazing time, which was insightful and affirming, warm and loving and not surprisingly totally life changing. I'd like to share some of my experience with you.

My name's Sonia and I volunteered as a Counsellor from the 4th March until 27th August 2015. I first started to feel a nagging feeling that I needed to help and give to others somewhere in the world in the Autumn of 2014. By the Easter of 2015 I realised that I could no longer ignore this need and embarked on making my dream of helping and volunteering somewhere in the world a reality.

After much research and internet searching I found People and Places. I was struck by how transparent and ethical they were. This was a big thing for me to do, taking a career break and putting my life on hold in the UK for 6 months whilst giving of my time freely. I needed to feel confident in who I was going to volunteer with and felt that People and Places fulfilled this for me. From the very start Kate and Sallie were helpful and kept in regular contact with me. I was guided through the process brilliantly and was happy to be matched with several projects. I chose to work in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, with [Emmanuel Advice Care Centre](#) in Kwanoxolo and [Emafini Primary School](#) in Kwa Dwesi.

Both were situated in townships allowing me the opportunity to work in environments that I have never experienced before. I also chose to live in a homestay with Mickey in New Brighton, a smart township not far from the centre of PE. As I'd be living in SA for 6 months, I wanted a different experience to that from home and to feel like I was part of a family. I wanted to make PE my home for the duration of my stay and living with Mickey allowed me to do this.

As mentioned earlier, I was guided through the process brilliantly, from my very first contact with People and Places, throughout my time in PE and to this day, months after arriving back home in Blighty. I must say though that my choice to stay in PE for 6 months was unusual. Volunteers don't tend to stay that long so I did have visas to think about and try to organise before I travelled to SA. UK travellers can stay in SA on a 3 month tourist visa that is stamped on our passport on arrival into the country. As I needed to apply for a visa to extend my stay People and Places helped by putting me in touch with a previous volunteer who had stayed in PE for 4 months so had experience of the visas required. Unfortunately for me the visa application process had an overhaul whilst I was in SA. The country took steps to tighten up their immigration procedures which in turn meant that what I had thought was the case, was no longer true. I did have no end of problems with my visa applications, the cost was increased and the South African time (nothing happens fast in SA) was frustrating. Saying that, I did not allow this to impact too much on my time in SA, I followed procedure and was able to stay for my full 6 months. If anyone is thinking of staying beyond the 3 months tourist visa, please do

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not hesitate to get in touch with me. Whilst in PE I was looked after by The Calabash Trust who is managed by Paul Miedema. Paul was amazing. We met most weeks to discuss my placements and to ensure I was happy and doing what I had hoped to be doing as well as to ensure that the projects that I was working with were gaining the most from me. The support I received from Paul and the rest of the team at Calabash along with Mickey was second to none. Paul and Mickey both showed me care and support even with the little things like when I was poorly with a migraine, Paul messaged me to ask if there was anything he could do and offered to call a doctor and Mickey made sure I had contact with my family by helping me to get on line, this involved going to several shops before we found what I wanted. Nothing was too much for them and I am so grateful for this. Paul, Mickey the Calabash team and everyone I worked with became my friend and I now call PE my second home.

[Here's some of my blog that wrote when I first arrived.](#)

I am now here! Day 5 of my time in South Africa and I still can't quite get my head around it all. Starting to settle into South African life. As I write this I can hear drumming, children playing and a hum of traffic and car horns outside. Life is quite different in PE, (Port Elizabeth) living in this township. I'm living on Dora Street in New Brighton which is a black township with a mix of houses, some are very basic and not so dissimilar from the day they were built in the apartheid years. Some with one main room and 2 bedrooms leading from it and others consisting of just one room (living, sleeping, cooking and washing to be done in that single space), both houses having a cold tap and stone sink on the ground outside with an outside toilet.

I'm living in Miki's house which was originally one living room with two bedrooms but she has since built extension upon extension and it is now quite a spacious home with four bedrooms, two bathrooms and a good size dining room, lounge and kitchen. I am really living in a luxurious home in this township. Miki has been a warm and accommodating host. I have my own room and I have brought a select few items to help make it feel like home. At Miki's I feel safe and enjoy the company that Miki and her boyfriend Mxloisi offer as well as having the time and space to myself. They are both lovely and welcoming and I do feel very grateful for this. Mxloisi is a Xhosa name and I'm guessing that you may be wondering how to pronounce the x? Xhosa is a tribe and language spoken in South Africa which has three click sounds as part of its language, x being one of them. The clicks are not something that I'm finding easy...however something I am determined to master before I leave.

[and more from my blog](#)

Writing this almost three weeks in, can you believe it? I've had a busy few weeks here and feel like I have a lot of work to do. The projects are very grateful to have me as there aren't counsellors in SA. After explaining what I do as a counsellor, (confusion between counsellor and psychologist) they are all very keen to use my skills. It really is a dream come true to be working as a counsellor here. Counselling is a vocation for me so the opportunity to help people here is such a privilege. I'm working at the [Emmanuel Advice Community Centre](#) on a Monday and Tuesday and [Emafini Primary School](#) on a Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

Emmanuel consists of a team of 7 ladies and 1 guy who give so freely of their time. They volunteer as they feel the community needs the support of Emmanuel. Amazing! They are all brave and courageous individuals with huge hearts. I felt instantly at home at Emmanuel as they were all so welcoming and greeted me lovingly with hugs and smiles. Sadly they had been broken into the night before, so spirits were understandably low. Just what Emmanuel doesn't need. They serve the community for free and yet were robbed by individuals within the community. Very difficult for the team and I hear that this is the second time they have been broken into in the last few weeks. Money has been taken as well as computer equipment. This is after the government cutting their grant, so they now only have donations to rely on, mostly coming in from previous volunteers. It really is hand to mouth here.

The township that Emmanuel serves was a township of shacks however the government recently built small houses to replace the shacks. All homes have running water and a proper sewage system with plumbing for a toilet and bath. This is a huge luxury for the people of this community but something I know I take for granted in the UK. Coming from a shack which would have made our sheds back home look like 5 star accommodation along with no running water or a toilet to a modern home is amazing. Many do not work in this township with ill health and poverty being a huge problem. There are still many individuals living with HIV. Medication has recently improved which is a god send. The medication given before had to be taken with food. With no money to buy food the medication was ineffective. Many have lost their lives to Aids however the picture is now looking a lot brighter.

There is still very little money, I met a family who is currently living off the disability allowance of one of the family members. The family consists of 5 adults and 3 children and they are living on R800 a month. This is approximately 50 pounds. You get my point?

We have so much in the UK. I am seeing real poverty and I am so so grateful for what I have. Despite the real difficulties, everyone I meet, are so lovely and welcoming. Without the support of Emmanuel I really worry what would happen to this community. The project supports in so many ways, helping and advising with meds, hygiene, social benefits and simply offering an ear and helping people to feel important, heard and understood. The team of Emmanuel are a resilient bunch and pick themselves up to carry on. I am so glad that I am here for 6 months. As much as I miss my family and friends, I do feel that I can offer Emmanuel some support that can help them to keep going. With odds seeming stacked up against them, they need all the help they can get.

Emafini Primary School teaches children from grade 1 - 7, up to the age of 13/14 years. The school was built to teach 800 children and it now has approximately 1300 pupils. Emafini has its challenges however it's a warm and friendly school with the Principal being very supportive of me being here. Emafini is housed within a pretty smart township however many of its' children come from poor townships living in shacks. Many have been orphaned or have lost someone close, live in poverty and within abusive homes. I'm currently working with the grade 7 learners as many have mastered a good standard of the English language at this age. I've started to coach and help the children with their study skills, doing group coaching sessions and working 1 to 1.

I will soon be working with them as a counsellor. I'm looking forward to this. I know it'll have its challenges and I will learn lots along the way but if I can help a child to feel important and valued, that'll be a huge achievement for me. I know that I won't be able to wave a magic wand and make everything ok for these children, as much as I would like to. My hope is that the work I do with these children will help them to experience a positive and non-judgemental relationship, helping them to cope with whatever challenges they are faced with in their young life.

Leisure time & life in the township

Even though I've been busy in my work, there has been some play too. I've ventured out and explored at weekends. The first Saturday I went on Safari which was awesome. I got to see my beloved elephants and much more. The second weekend I went on a road trip and stayed at a homestay in the mountains in a village called Cata. A brilliant experience with very basic facilities but the most loving and welcoming family you could wish to meet. We then travelled along to a Xhosa tribal village in Mooiplaas and then onto the Wild Coast. So beautiful, in fact really quite breathtaking. This weekend reminded me how important it is for me to connect with nature. Since I've been here I haven't really done this and haven't even looked up at the stars which is something I love to do.

Living in the township with Miki is a great learning opportunity for me but I am aware that I am the only white person here. People do stare at me and point as white people don't live in townships. The fact that I am white also means that I'm perceived as wealthy. I don't go out when dark because of

this. I don't wish to worry anyone. I am ok and safe, I'm just not taking any risks. On a positive, I have found going to the beach really grounding. It's a really beautiful beach here with pale sands and sand dunes. I'm finding my way around PE and spent an afternoon walking along the beach last week. This was great and something that I need to do regularly.

A typical day

I am going to try and paint a picture by sharing with you how my time is going here in South Africa...and what better way to do this than to give you an insight into a typical day. I'll start with Emafini. I'm up at around 6.15 am. Some of you have asked what I am eating here. Breakfast isn't that different from home, usually cereal or toast and I am pleased to say that the tea here isn't that different from home either so I am able to have my morning cup of tea. I am then ready for my 7.45am pick up where the Calabash mini bus collects me from my home at Mickey's in New Brighton and takes me on the 20 minute journey to Kwa Dwesi where Emafini Primary School is situated. Kwa Dwesi is a smart township up on a hill with lovely views across the township and through to the mountains in the distance. The homes here are owned by black people who are relatively comfortable with a good income. Some of the houses are quite large and this area certainly feels more affluent than where I am living in New Brighton.

Calabash - I arrive at Emafini just after 8am after a good chat and catch up with the Calabash driver of the day, either Xolani, Boyce or Nelson. They are all lovely people who live in the townships of PE: all open and happy to share their insights and experiences. I have become particularly fond of Nelson and we have promised to stay friends for life. He is a joy to be around. We share a similar outlook on life, he is always smiling and able to see the positives in everything. He is making it his mission to teach me Xhosa. Slowly but surely I am picking up the basics. I am so proud that I can now pronounce the x, c and q clicks. Horraahh! Something that I thought I'd never do. Forming the clicks feels quite alien to my western English speaking tongue but I have worked hard and practiced lots. Lots of click sounds have been heard coming from my room and whilst in the shower!

Back to my school day...after the daily staff meeting which has usually finished by 8.15am, I greet the teachers and make my way to my room which is connected to classroom 2. Like the teachers, the learners at Emafini are all very friendly and greet me when I enter their classroom. They know me by name, I wish I could say the same. So many children and too many names to learn but I always feel very welcomed by them. I have my own room to carry out my counselling. It is in fact a large store room with a small rectangular window at the front and back of the room. Quite dark and cold, even when very hot outside so I have become accustomed to dressing in layers to keep myself warm. Thank you for the package of warm cosy clothes from my Auntie Sheila...the weather is now turning and the temperature is dropping to around 20 degrees in the day and 13 degrees when dark, so they are very much needed and appreciated. That sounds mad doesn't it, I am talking about 20 degrees being too cold...how am I going to cope at home this winter? I am smiling at this thought and in part amazement at how I have so easily adapted to the climate here.

My work - back to my room at Emafini ... I am grateful for the space as it's fairly quiet and private and fine for my counselling meetings. So my day at Emafini is usually taken up by 3 to 4 counselling meetings, all usually lasting the 50 minute counselling hour. My clients are mostly the children but I have also been asked to meet with some of the parents and the school teachers and staff have also been meeting with me too. I can't tell you how happy I am with how my counselling work is going. I am reminded everyday of how we can connect on a deep human level despite cultural, racial and economic differences. We all just want to be loved, heard, understood and accepted for who we are...basic human needs which I am feeling do not change regardless of any other differences we may have. I am building really positive therapeutic relationships and feel very lucky and privileged to be here, doing what I am. My day at Emafini ends at 2pm on a Monday and at 1pm on a Friday.

A very short day compared to what I am used to at home. The school day is shorter here with children also playing quite an active role in the school in ways that would be unheard of in the UK. On a Friday, lessons are over at 12pm with children then having the responsibility of cleaning their classroom. A hive of activity then ensues with children mopping the floors, polishing the tables and floors and washing the windows. The children all seem to do this without much complaint and get stuck in. I do get the sense that children within the townships also play quite an active role at home helping with the chores along with preparing and cooking meals.

After school - At the end of my school day, I'm picked up by Calabash who either take me back home or to the sea front, depending on how I feel. The sea front with the Board Walk and Summerstrand is very similar to what I am used to at home. Previously an affluent white area which is becoming more mixed since independence but it does still have a way to go. The shops and conveniences are familiar with a cafe and restaurants along with a supermarket. I often enjoy a coffee at Kaffeine, a cafe with free Wifi! A luxury here with data being so expensive in SA. Apparently SA is one of the most expensive countries in the world for data. My western needs are met at Summerstrand Village and if I want to catch a film or go for a meal I'm able to get this at the Board Walk. A smart complex which does feel a bit like a film set based around a lake. It does the job though and I like how people of all races come here to enjoy their free time. The sun sets at around 5.30pm now and sets quite quickly. I have to ensure that I'm home before dark.

Something that I'm really not used to at home: it isn't safe for woman to be out on their own after dark, especially in the townships. There is still high levels of crime including sex crimes so I'm not taking any risks. Generally though I do feel very safe, I have Mickey and Paul to call on if ever I need help. I made it my mission to make PE feel like my home as you could fall into the trap of spending your time at Mickey's and relying on Calabash to take you to and from your projects without you doing anything else at the end of your working day.

Monga, one of the lovely guys at Calabash took me on my first journey in a taxi accompanying me from the Calabash office at Summerstrand to my home in New Brighton. The taxis are PE's equivalent to our public transport bus service. They serve the township areas and they're mostly used by black and coloured people living in the townships. They're small mini buses which seat around 18 people but I have known more to squeeze on. People are comfortable getting up close and personal here in PE. Leave your British need for personal space behind when you get on a taxi. The taxis are owned by individuals who all bring their own personality to their bus by playing music and decorating the vehicles inside and out. Some taxis feel like a clubbing taxi with loud music booming and the conductor shouting the destination of the bus from the window out at passing individuals. The average taxi fare is about R10 which is equivalent to about 50p. Get used to people asking you where you're going as white people don't tend to use taxis. There hasn't been a day where I haven't been asked where I am going or if I'm ok. I think that this is only because seeing a white face walking around a township is unusual and people genuinely want to make sure I am alright. I often walk from Mickey's to the local supermarkets in the day, journey into town and the seafront and also Green Acres shopping mall using taxis and the feel safe.

A day at Emmanuel - Emmanuel My day starts the same when I'm working at Emmanuel, I'm picked up by the Calabash bus and taken to the centre for 8am. Once everyone has arrived, we meet in the crèche for prayers and singing with the children and then all hug each other wishing each other a good day ahead. I've read that 10 hugs a day improves our well-being and happiness, well you'll get your quota of hugs here. The days seem to take a while to get going here, certainly not what I was used to at home but everyone feels like they're part of a family here. We all share a hot drink and play with the children before the crèche and pre-school lessons and activities start. The care workers then meet in the office to discuss who is doing what on that day. I often go out with the care workers to meet my clients carrying out counselling appointments with them at their home. I am having to adapt my

counselling and be a little more flexible with my boundaries here. People aren't used to counsellors here and privacy hasn't really got the same meaning here as it has at home. I have also been meeting with counsellors here.

Emmanuel welcomed visitors last week from Lynchburg College in Virginia, USA. The students brought lots of energy and fun to Emmanuel and the pre-school and crèche children loved spending time with them. They gifted Emmanuel with new tables and chairs for the crèche along with much needed toys and medical/first aid supplies. It was great to get to know them, all great young people wanting to help and give to others. Emmanuel is now very quiet without them!

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