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Kathy Rablah – Gede Special School, Kenya – 9th May to 11th July 2017



My son, Joe, and I decided to volunteer for different projects in Kenya this year and we were lucky enough to come across People and Places through our search for potential placements. Joe worked at Sita Community Snake Farm on a conservation placement and I volunteered at Gede Special School. The whole process and experience was very well supported and organised with friendly, professional and personal one to one guidance. For me, as a teacher, it was important to know that we were being 'screened' appropriately and that we were expected to go through a proper application procedure, complete with references and disclosure checks. Not only did this reassure me of the organisation's ethics but also gave me a genuine sense of trust and confidence that the projects would match up to expectations and would suit our individual skills and vocational interests.

Although some of the pre-preparation paperwork took a while to get processed, it was thorough and rigorous and this, again, was reassuring. So, too was the direct contact with Turtle Bay, with the wonderful Ken heading things up there.

On arrival in Mombasa, we were met by Simon, our driver and had a long wet journey to Watamu because of the rains! Having been to Kenya many times, we were just excited to be back and to get 'stuck in' to the work. We had a day to relax and get over the journey and then Ken organised an orientation tour of the area and of the places where Joe and I would be working which was really helpful, especially for me to meet the Headteacher, Madame Karo, prior to starting at the school.

Gede Special School



In short, my experience at Gede Special School was incredible. The school is situated right next to the Primary School but has its own area, buildings and staff team. There are classrooms for the Hearing Impaired children and separate classes for those children who suffer from cerebral palsy and other physical disabilities. I spent the first few days observing different groups and working in both areas with the aim, and advice from Mme Karo, to 'find where my heart settled'. It settled on Class 2, working alongside Madame Peris, and during the next two months I worked closely with Adam, Asma, Sylvia and Furaha.



Sylvia colouring



Adam proud of his work



A very tired Furaha after exams

I led many of the lessons from the Tusome Curriculum each day including English, Maths, RS, Social Studies, Science and, at times, tried to deliver some Kiswahili despite the fact I speak very little! I also worked closely with Madame Gertrude's students, some of those with the most severe physical needs and challenges.



The fun of making pipe cleaner sunglasses! What to do when you can't find any other resources?!

It didn't take long to feel infected by the incredible joie de vivre and resilience of all the children I came into contact with. It is easy to write words such as 'humbling', 'inspiring', 'life changing' but harder to convey their true weight and meaning. My experience with the children and staff at Gede was all these.

There were obvious challenges. Luckily, I have spent many happy times in Kenya and this has enabled me to become familiar with the culture, the place and the people - but never have I worked there. The main practical challenge, apart from not being able to speak Swahili or knowing sign language, was about learning the structure and delivery of the curriculum which is very set. There is not much room for deviation from the Tusome Programme although I was able to do some creative work during the course of my placement. The delivery is very much 'chalk and talk' and all students get the same diet with very little differentiation; it is all hugely different to the agenda and style of secondary education in the UK. But, the children all strive keenly to learn and they know absolutely, how important education is; they are very hardworking and eager and have such respect for knowledge and, indeed, their teachers!

Another practical challenge, but also a big emotional one, was the situation about much needed resources at the school for the children, including uniforms. When I first started, I was shocked by the lack of basic equipment and how students with very poor motor skills were expected to use just a pencil and paper whilst working on the floor or in a wheelchair. My class had one ruler and one eraser between them and a pencil each, and that was that apart from their text and exercise books. As time progressed though I discovered there was actually a real wealth of resources which were kept in the store. There is a system whereby you can ask for something from the store from the member of staff in charge and then sign it out but only small items are usually handed out.

Note from 'people and places': this is often the case in many of the projects where we work – resources are treasured and there is a lack of confidence in using them. However, it's good to hear that they can be accessed at Gede, with a request from volunteers.

One of the things I was most proud of achieving whilst out there, and one which I contributed my project money to (as well as the money from a flood of donations from friends and family) was getting a uniform made for every child at the school who needed one. These uniforms were made to measure for each child by the wonderful Mama Willy and her team. The uniforms were designed particularly with no zips, buttons or hooks, for ease of use by the children who cannot use such things. The girls had dresses and the boys had elasticated shorts and football style shirts so they could manage basic functions (like going to the toilet) either independently or with much less help.

Mama Willy and her team at work



The staff at the school all made me incredibly welcome and accepted me fully into their routines, their classrooms and their lives. I am proud to call many of them my friends now and have pledged to go back as soon as I can afford to. There are things to get done and I am determined to try and link up with a school here at home and make some small steps towards a longer, more sustainable relationship. There are many sponsors and benefactors of Gede Special School; many tourists and well-wishers support the children in myriad ways and I know I am just one of those who want to try and make a small difference to these children's lives. I feel absolutely privileged to have worked there. My letter of appreciation from Madame Karo is very special and one in which she says: "I hope you will find the time to come back and see the seeds of creativity and innovation which you have sown in the minds of the learners, which will have grown to maturity". I aim to do just that.

The Gede Madames!

Precious, Pauline (me) and Peris



Turtle Bay Beach Club



When Joe and I signed up to volunteer in Kenya, neither of us dreamed that TBBC would be hosting us during our stay. It is a place we know very well, having been there on holiday many times! Joe went first when he was only a year old; he learnt to swim there and we have, over the years, made friends with many people at, or through, this beautiful hotel. It was absolutely serendipitous that we discovered the Gede Small Home project through People and Places and then, ended up returning to a place we love so dearly. Our heartfelt thanks go to Damien Davies, the General Manager, and his incredible team of staff who made our time in Watamu even better as volunteers, not just as holiday makers. They are fantastic people and our accommodation could not have been improved.

We also could not have asked for a better person to support us with our community work than Ken, Turtle Bay's conservation and community officer. He was absolutely brilliant in terms of looking after us and ensuring that every aspect of the placement worked smoothly, from checking our packed lunches were on time, to sorting out our daily 'tuktuk' journeys and sorting the relevant paperwork for our stay.

Our transport to work



Ken provided us with constant advice, support, conversation and absolute professionalism; indeed, he became very special to us both. He is an incredible asset to the hotel, to the visitors and to the local community.

Our leisure time was filled with many of the activities the hotel provided, as well as a dhow trip, snorkelling and going out and about in the area. We also managed to fit in a weekend safari to Tsavo and Taita Hills and spent time with friends in the community. Although it was the 'low' season when we were there, the weather did not prevent us from doing anything although sometimes the wind and rain meant we couldn't swim in the sea as much as we would have liked.

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Thank you.