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Val Rolls: Court Diversion Programme in Castries, St. Lucia January 31<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> March inclusive

## Pre-departure

About six weeks before departure I was provided with a detailed summary of the topics that were to be covered in the English and maths lessons during my stay there. I researched materials relating to this and took with me what I hoped would be relevant books, games, a DVD, pens, pencils and a calculator. I had been told that the participants were aged between 12 and 19 and I assumed they would be less able than perhaps mainstream children. They were in fact mostly very able and some of the materials I took were too young. However, I left these there as there were a few children who might well benefit from going back a few steps to have a principle explained to them.

## On arrival

We were met on arrival (Tues) at the apartment by Yinka Alexander- the wife of Delroy and sister-in-law of Nova who together run Sacred Sports who are the link organisation between People and Places (P & P) and the Court Diversion Programme (CDP).



*self-catering apartments at Rodney Bay*

The following day we met Yinka again who took us into Castries to show first me, where I would be working and then on to Ciceron to show Val Kemp where she would be working. We were able to see the Headmistress and have a tour of the school- Lady Gordon. She then took us back to Rodney Bay and onto Gros Islet to have a look around.

The next day (Thurs) Yinka asked us to meet her at the Rodney Bay bus stop, at the time we would

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be going to work, to do the bus journey to and from so that we knew where to get the bus each way. This was more for Val Kemp's benefit than mine because she had to take two buses and she had to know where to pick it up from in Castries. Also, I visited my placement in Castries and met with Mrs Dyer the Headmistress and Mr. Simon the remedial teacher I would be working alongside. I was welcomed very warmly and we agreed to start work the following day. The orientation Yinka gave us was comprehensive and we felt confident when setting off on our own the next day.

### The Placement

I was given my own desk in Mr. Simon's room and everyone was very friendly and helpful. The programme is primarily designed to address the children's behaviour. The ethos of CDP is not to think of it as a "school" in the normal sense of the word as the children which attend have either dropped out of mainstream school or had/have issues around school which they need to address. Therefore, there are not lessons in English and maths every day. The children are divided into 4 groups and groups 1 and 3, who are taught together, have 2 hours remedial teaching a week and groups 2 and 4, who are also taught together, have 3 hours remedial teaching a week. These were the only lessons I was actively involved in working alongside Mr. Simon. None of the children had been earmarked for my special help prior to my arrival and so it took me a little while to find them and offer to help them. As they didn't know me and being teenagers, there was a bit of reluctance on their part but as the weeks went on I got to know their names and they became more amenable.

Life skills and job preparation is a valuable part of the timetable and they learn about food and nutrition, agriculture, sports, craft, art and performing arts.



*practical skills - agriculture & nutrition*

They also have downtime where they watch TV, movies or play games. I joined in with all these activities either contributing or just observing.



*These murals were partly done by CDP. The art teacher Gary took them to a college or workshop and gave them training in how to use the paints etc; and there were about 4 or 5 of the pupils who then did it with other pupils from different places over a week-end. They gave up their free time to do it.*

I had been prepared to work from 9-5 but I only stayed until 5p.m. on Monday and Tuesday because the Performing Arts class took place between 3.30 and 5p.m. I left at 3p.m. the rest of the week because after 3p.m. there were only games/movies timetabled and it was a half day for the children on Friday -12 noon- followed by a staff meeting which finished about 3p.m.

It took me about 3 weeks to get to know all the children's names but then the schoolchildren kept changing as some finish their time of school suspension and leave and then new faces arrive. I felt it would have been more advantageous for me to have been there longer and to have had the slower readers/learners to work with from the word go. I enjoyed my time there although I felt I had to tread carefully with the children who attended as most had problems, some quite complex, relating to behaviour, home life, gang related factors and there was a lot of background information that I couldn't possibly know about having just arrived but which meant I had to be guided by the staff and do what they wanted me to do.

A particular area where volunteer input would be useful is in IT. I'm sure the Staff could be trained to a higher level of expertise so that the children can use computers more. They seemed to engage well when using computers and this is a vital skill for them and their future.

The resources I left were:

- A DVD Goodbye Bafana about Nelson Mandela's life whilst in prison. However, a U.K. DVD cannot be played on a St. Lucian DVD player. It has to be reconfigured. Mr. Simon said he could get it done.
- Pens and pencils with rubbers on the end- an endless supply needed.
- 1 calculator but they could do with half a dozen more.
- A story suitable for teenagers, in chapters, with comprehension questions after each chapter. I'd used this when I worked in the prison and it had worked well and the children seemed to enjoy it too.
- A times table sheet which proved useful as they didn't know their tables well
- English and Maths books as per Waterstones but they need to be for ages 12 and over as the children are generally quite able.

The children do not work from textbooks but are given photocopied sheets to work from. The only book I saw where these came from was ISBN-976-8014-16-4 Mathematics- A Complete Course with CXC Questions by Raymond Toolsie. I don't think it would be worthwhile for a new volunteer to buy this in advance.

They could do with some new dictionaries and a big cardboard clock for teaching purposes.

The dress code is fairly smart. No shorts/flip-flops. Open toe sandals are fine and T shirts but shoulders should be covered. Elbow length tops are best. I wore  $\frac{3}{4}$  length trousers which were fine.

### Successes and Disappointments

I succeeded in joining in with the school life and assisting the slower learners where possible but I was a little disappointed not to have had the opportunity to help these learners more. I feel that if I had been there longer I could have done this. I didn't really have a highlight but I enjoyed the experience as a whole and everyone there was nice. The staff are quite strict with the children, but then they have to be so as to keep order, but they are at pains to point out how we should treat each other, how to cope with difficult situations, how to have an awareness of the people around them and how they might be feeling and to provide a safe environment for them away from "the block" where they might be getting into trouble.

### Accommodation

Our accommodation was in Rodney Bay which is the main tourist area of St. Lucia. It is really one road with hotels, apartments, two shopping malls and lots of restaurants. Running alongside is the beach- a beautiful beach with water sports and a couple of restaurants. Our apartment was across the road from the beach-2 minutes walk. After work we would usually go for a swim before dinner. I shared the apartment with Val Kemp and we each had our own room and bathroom. There was a big lounge diner with kitchen and a veranda where we could sit of an evening.



*Rodney Bay – a scenic sunset*



*co-volunteers Valerie, Esme & Val*

We planned our week-ends so as to best use our time there. One week-end we went to Martinique after school on Friday and came back Sunday afternoon. I went horse riding and we went to Pigeon Island which is a National Trust island nearby where it is nice to walk and there is a lovely restaurant. Another day we went by boat to Marigot Bay which was very enjoyable. Another day we hired a car and I drove to Soufriere, a fishing village a little way away and onto an old

plantation and of course viewed the Pitons.



*And a P.S. from Val:* This is the current CDP building.

We were on the top floor although Mr. Simon and Mrs Dyer went to look at another building in Castries that they might move to as the building they are in is very expensive and they need to find somewhere cheaper.

There were several times when I was there that they didn't have enough money to buy meat or fish to go with the children's midday meal. We all chipped in a few dollars on a Friday to buy Monday's meat and I gave them a couple of hundred dollars to help out as I wanted to give £200 to the project and I was actually giving \$200 dollars (which is less).

**Note: the £200 pounds that Val mentions is the ring-fenced project donation, which is part of the overall placement costs.**

So they realised they needed to be in a cheaper building and they went to look at a school nearby attached to a convent which was now empty and they seemed quite hopeful they would be able to use it. It had playground space which would be good as apart from Friday sports and agriculture for the boys on one morning a week they don't go outside all day.



*Friday sports on the beach*

Val Rolls March 2013.

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