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Volunteer Report - Zoe File

Mary's Little Lambs School

This was my third placement for Mary's Little Lambs school - initially my motivation for volunteering was that I wanted to share my skills as a primary school teacher, and volunteering overseas was something that I'd always wanted to do.

As I had to fit in with work commitments, my placement this time was for just under 3 weeks (Tuesday 25 March - Friday 12 April). This worked for me, as I was already familiar with the school and routines, and with life in the Gambia in general. My first placement had been for four weeks, the first of which had very much been a settling-in period; which I didn't need by my third visit, but which I'd certainly appreciated the first time I was there.



The focus of my placement was to establish a library at Mary's Little Lambs school, to be used by children and staff. On previous placements, I'd been struck by the lack of reading and reference materials, and through discussions with Dianne (People&Places), and Michelle and Lisong (Mary's Little Lambs), we agreed that I would ask children and parents at my UK school to donate books, which I would ship to the Gambia to arrive in time for my placement. I spent the months before my placement publicising the project, collecting and packing books and then delivering them to the shipping agent to be transported to the Gambia. It took a lot of organisation, but it was all made worthwhile when the books finally arrived a couple of weeks before my placement began.

My arrival in the Gambia went very smoothly, thanks as always to Fatou (the volunteering co-ordinator there), who met me at the airport and supplied me with a SIM card to use whilst I was there. Fatou kept in touch during my placement and was always available to help with any issues that arose (thankfully, none did!).

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My placement went extremely well and I was very proud to leave three weeks later with the library fully-stocked with over 1000 books. (I had also been given some donations by friends and family which were used to buy some additional non-fiction books and to build some lovely - and very sturdy - bookshelves). In the last week of my placement I ran induction sessions for each class (including nursery) and also recruited and trained a team of librarians (from prep 4 and 5 children). I created an inventory and a library handbook: the intention is for the library to be incorporated into lessons, so it was important to establish rules and make a timetable for the library's use.



I would whole-heartedly recommend volunteering to anyone who has the relevant skills, time and financial resources to do so. The library project was a long-cherished dream and it was fantastic to see how thrilled the children - and staff! - were when we held an opening ceremony just before the end of my placement. One of the reasons that I've volunteered at MLLs school three times now, is that I genuinely feel like part of the team there. Volunteers are welcomed and valued by staff and children alike, which is something I've found on each of my placements with the school. It feels like the work that volunteers do to support the school really does have a lasting impact on children's learning, which was an important motivation for me.



My accommodation was at Riyan apartments, which was comfortable, secure - and only a 10 minute walk from school! I stayed in one of the two-bed cottages by the swimming pool: larger than I really needed, but very quiet and extremely comfortable, with the added bonus of the supermarket, restaurant and money-change next door.

There were plenty of things to do at weekends and I was never bored. It's very easy to organise trips and tours - one highlight for me was a fishing trip on the River Gambia, which was fantastic. It's easy to get to Senegal too, or to travel further afield within The Gambia itself. The wildlife, birds and the general way of life in the Gambia are well worth experiencing: people very friendly and welcoming, and it feels like a second home now! It's been a fantastic life experience and one that I would thoroughly recommend.

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