

Olivia Teahan on her experience volunteering with OLA

From “Waterville” Cooneyslane, Douglas in Cork, Olivia has spent eight weeks as a volunteer with the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles in the Diocese of Shinyanga, Tanzania.

I spent a wonderful two months in Tanzania, a country which I’m sure you have all probably heard stories about if you have not been yourself. I will tell you about the experience I had there as an 18-year-old who was about to start university. My primary focus for my time in Tanzania was to teach English and to do whatever else was asked of me in order to help the communities that I visited. I had a lovely warm welcome from Sister Cassie and Sister Anne Cahill at Mwanza airport. When we arrived at Mwanza house the welcome continued as soon as the door opened! I met such vibrant characters, Sisters Perpetua and Juliet, who were so joyful at the new arrival that I felt at home right away. It was a great start and within minutes I was learning words in Kiswahili.

I soon saw the immense work that the Sisters of Mwamapalala put in every day at their clinic and the nearby secondary and primary schools. Outside of their work, the motivation and guidance they provide for the people of the community is invaluable. Every day Sister Anne Cahill and I did classes with primary school students who were on holidays from school at the time. Sister Anne did lots of grammar with them and I helped her in the classes. At the weekend we would do a class with secondary school students outside the Sisters house, reading an English text. I was excited to teach by myself but nervous about my quality of teaching! Sister Anne assured me that being a fluent English speaker who was open to other people I would be fine, and I was. Nollaig, a teacher from Cork, arrived after a fortnight or so, and she was a great person to have around. She would pester the local workmen when they were napping instead of finishing a piece of maintenance work at the local school or well! It was definitely interesting to watch the men’s’ reactions to a young woman telling them what to do; Nollaig and I could see that the men were not used to it at all. Nonetheless it worked and we saw a huge difference in the school dormitories which the men cleaned up completely. I did get an insight in to the very lax attitude of the Sukuma tribe (Tanzania’s largest tribe).

One thing that stuck in my head on arriving in Mwamapalala was the warmth and generosity in the community: when Sister Anne and I went visiting a few locals who lived alone we met Bernadette, an elderly widow with great spirit who welcomed me (a total stranger, of course) with hugs, smiles, and much interest. Another lovely woman who makes a living by selling the nuts she grows insisted on giving us as many nuts as she could fit into our bags, and she gave with such willingness and again a big grin! I was overwhelmed by the selflessness of this woman and I realized how much Sister Anne was appreciated in this little community. Every evening we had prayers, a very enjoyable part of my day and something which I found a special and memorable aspect of my trip. I’m very lucky to have been involved in the Sisters prayer time throughout the two months, and they made sure I knew that it was my own choice completely whether I came or not. We often watched the African news and sometimes even a film after prayers: Sister Juliet, Sister Anne, Sister Angele, Nollaig and I. They were like my little family for the few weeks and I have very good memories of Mwamapalala with each of them as well as with the beautiful and generous locals there.

Anne McCormack took me to Bugisi made me feel welcome and comfortable throughout my time there, as did all of the Sisters I lived with in Bugisi – Sister Emanuella, Sister Cecelia, Sister Susannah, and Sister Comfort. They are special women with great hearts. In Bugisi there was a nursery and a polytechnic school, both of which I had the pleasure of working in every morning. I was greeted every morning by the nursery children with ‘Good Morning, Sister!!’ They were eager to learn English and so sweet.

In the evenings, after lunch and a siesta in the afternoon, I did one-to-one classes with two exam students, who I became good friends with and am still in contact with. I was really thrilled to know that they found our classes useful in understanding what the exams would require and how to approach questions. I am happy that I was able to give them some support coming up to the exam! I was lucky to meet such wonderful people, to become close with them, and to see the differences between my own life and the lives of young people in Tanzania. It was yet another highlight of such a wonderful two months.