

Katie McAleece on her experience on Volunteering with OLA

Travelling to an African country to do voluntary work was something that I had always wanted to do and thankfully I was able to tick that off the bucket list this summer. I finished my first year as a primary school teacher on Friday 27th June and the very next day I was on my way to Tanzania with 3 friends, Karen, Orla and Brenda to work along with the OLA Sisters in the community called Buigisi. I was a little apprehensive and unsure about what to expect as I packed my bags that Friday evening. We had done some fundraising and each filled two suit cases of clothes, toys and different resources to give out when we arrived so we had some craic trailing them around Dublin Airport.

After a long journey via Amsterdam (which involved a bit of a sprint through the airport) on Sunday morning, we arrived in the city of Mwanaza to a warm welcome from Sister Dolores and Sister Anne. Unfortunately our luggage hadn't made it to Mwanza yet so we had to wait until the next day before we could make the final part of our journey. This gave us the chance to stay at the OLA house in Mwanza, where we received excellent hospitality from Sister Cassie and Sister Theresa. On the Monday our luggage was ready to be collected so we set off on the road to Buigisi. I remember being tired on the journey but I didn't want to sleep, the country side and the sights were so intriguing, I didn't want to miss anything. Along the road there were a lot of people either walking or on a bike, carrying or pulling something along.

We arrived in Buigisi in the late evening and prepared ourselves for our first day of life in Buigisi. Orla and I would teach in the primary school, Karen would teach book keeping to the girls in the secondary school and Brenda would do physiotherapy in the clinic.

I will never forget how welcoming the children in the school were that first morning and every morning when we arrived. They stood up and greeted us in English before asking us how we were every day. This was something which Orla and I looked forward to hearing each day and we even began saying it to each other. Over the two and a half weeks we worked in the school along with the teachers, taking the classes for a range of lessons including children English, Maths, Music and PE. We even did a science lesson which the children loved.

Every day in the school was different and I soon fell in love with the children. One day we brought in some colouring pages and pencils for the children to use. They were amazed at using the colouring pencils and I noticed that they were so careful when they were colouring in as they were scared to make a mistake. This showed me how much the children appreciate what they are given. At break times in the school the children are given a cup of porridge which is made by Sister Anne earlier in the morning. The class would fall silent as they slurped up their porridge. After this they would make their way outside to form a circle for song time. Here the children would sing and dance along with each other. I loved this time and it was during this that I came to realise that these boys and girls are just like children from home. Even though they have walked miles to get to school after having done chores at home in the morning, these are happy children who have the same eagerness to learn, play and have fun with their friends.

In the afternoons when school finished Sister Kate would take us out round other villages where we got to meet many people and give them some of the things we had brought over. Sister Kate would talk to them in Swahili and explain to us what they were saying. One thing that struck me about the people was how welcoming they were. As soon as we approached their houses the adults would instruct the children to get a seat for us to sit on. We spent time with the families and played with the children before moving on to the next house. We

We would give them toys or clothes and it was lovely to see how much they appreciated it even though it was only something small. Every day we did, this I felt truly humbled and inspired by these people because of their attitude and faith. They have very little possessions, maybe a one roomed house and a small piece of land. But it is a very simple life style. They live for the day, for now, rather than worry about next week or next month because they simply have to take each day as it comes. This made me think about how we live our lives at home. With everything happening around us, we very rarely take time to appreciate what is happening in the moment we are in. We are so often blinded by what we need or what we want, rather than appreciate what we do have.

We met many people in our time who have gone through very challenging times but it is clear that the OLA Sister provide them with great support and comfort. Brenda came across a child in the clinic one day, and the next day she wasn't there as her mother had taken her home for fear she wouldn't be able to pay the medical bills. Sister Kate wanted to go to her home to explain that the OLA would help with the costs, but all they knew about the child was the village she lived in. We spent that afternoon trying to find the little girl, travelling from house to house. We met the village leader who was helping us also. Finally, when it seemed we would never find her, Brenda remembered that she had a picture of the child on her camera. Seeing this, the Village Leader knew where to go to. We arrived at her house and met the family while Sister Kate spoke to the mother about bringing the child back and how they would help her with the medical fees. To me this day (along with every other day) was an example of how the OLA missionaries are willing to do anything, to go the extra mile to help the people of Tanzania.

In the evenings we all came together for Mass. The church is small, quiet and very peaceful and was a perfect place to reflect upon the events of the day, to pray for the people we met and to give thanks.

Our time in Buigisi, quickly came to an end and it was very difficult when we had to leave the school children. We brought in face paints and had a fantastic last day with the pupils and staff, but I knew that we were leaving these amazing children and it was quite emotional. We were also very sad saying goodbye to Sister Kate, Anne, Doleres and Yvette and all the people of Buigis But Brenda, Karen, Orla and I all agreed that we would be back in Bugisi again one day.

Having returned to school at home I find myself thinking about my time in Tanzania quite often throughout the day. It was an unbelievably positive experience which I will never forget and I would advise anyone who is thinking about volunteering to go for it.



