

Round Square International Service Project in South Africa by Oluwatomi Fadoju

On the 2nd of August 2008, I took part in a Round Square International Service Project in Philipollis, South Africa. Having never been to the country before, the trip was, among many things, an exciting exploration of another region of the continent from which I come.

I can think of so many words and phrases to describe the project, but above them all, I am fortunate enough to be able to describe it as life changing. When Kurt Hahn began the educational movement that forms the basis of the Round Square Ideals, his aim was to educate and train students to become well rounded individuals. Although the project chiefly manifests the ideals of Service and Internationalism, it was indeed a well rounded experience because the other four ideals came into it in many different ways too.

At Blomfontein Airport, where all the students met for the first time, it was truly amazing to see conversations sparking so quickly because most of us had mutual friends as a result of taking part in other Round Square Events. This of course facilitated getting to know each other, so the group of twenty students became more like a family of twenty by the end of the first week. Students had flown from far and wide to be a part of some positive change in the world. This is what we all had in common, and we were determined to make our mark, and this mutual ambition allowed us to respect and enjoy our differences.

The first two days were spent acclimatising to the community of Philipollis. Before meeting the children we would be spending a lot of time with, our project leader explained that some of them are HIV positive, others are victims of abuse and they all live in poverty. We were to build an Adult Literacy Centre in the local area, which would be accessible to all the locals as a building for independent and group study. We met the locals for the first time at the church after the matinee service. They bombarded the group with tons of all that they had to give – love. We reciprocated, and in doing so I learned that this is the most valuable and genuine exchange any human being can make with another.

On Monday the 5th of August, work began. 8,300 bricks were offloaded on day one and the foundation was laid. Brick laying began on day two, and the work site was divided into little colonies of students carrying out designated tasks: cement mixing, sand sieving, rock collecting (for the foundation), brick laying and water fetching. I'll always remember the atmosphere at the worksite as being one of incredible team spirit and synergy. It was very physically challenging but even after two weeks, on the last day of work, I remember looking around at a group of exhausted people who could not have been happier exhausting themselves in any other way. This was inspiring to see.

A typical working day began at 8.30 am when we ate breakfast. We left for the site at 9.00am (3km from the house) and worked until 12.00pm, when we would return for lunch, and resumed at 2.00pm until 5.00pm when we retired for the day. The local

nursery school was next door to the site, so short breaks were spent playing with the children in the play ground and singing nursery rhymes with them in the classrooms. They were not allowed on the worksite. However their help was needed and much appreciated in collecting rocks, so they were temporarily a part of the team. There was something about the positive work that we were doing that drew the people in the area together. They would often stand and watch us working, many times offering to help but for the most part they could not have felt more proud and enthusiastic about the work that was going on in their local township. They felt dignified that we had come all that way to make their lives better and we felt dignified that they appreciated it so much.

At the end of week one, the adventure and fun began. We traveled four hours on a bus to Hope Town which is situated near the bank of the Orange River. A weekend of camping, white water rafting, hiking and star gazing on the banks of the river was the perfect finish to an intense week at the site. I thoroughly enjoyed the game hike at sunset, some stunning photos of 'Sprinkbuck' were taken in the idyllic scenery and we were able to become acquainted with the rapids we would be rafting over the following day. This was incredibly scary for a first time white water rafter like myself.

White water rafting was awesome. I will forever be proud of the fact that my raft, the Yellow Submarine was the only one of four to make it over the most difficult rapid. Despite the fact that I lost my paddle and a trainer (temporarily), those five seconds that had been nervously anticipated for weeks turned out to be something well worth doing again. This activity further enhanced bonding in the group, as well as late night camp fire discussions and debates. I learnt so many games and jokes from everyone so there isn't a day when I don't think of something funny someone had said or done and chuckle to myself. They were such an amazing group of people that I will always keep in touch with.

Shortly after our arrival in Philipollis on Sunday, we went to meet the great John Varti at his game park. He is a nature conservationist who is famous for his controversial project with tigers. Both the National Geographic Channel and the Discovery Channel have produced documentaries on John Varti's work because it is truly astonishing. About four years ago, he took a male and a female tiger (Ron and Julie) from Asia to South Africa in an attempt to make them adapt to living there. He spoke with great concern about the inhuman way in which tigers in Asia are slaughtered for medicinal and trade purposes, explaining that the tiger is rapidly becoming an endangered species. John Varti himself trained the tigers to hunt in the African wild and his experiment is so far successful. We were fortunate enough to be able to meet Ron and Julie who have now given birth to a baby tiger. On meeting the tigers, one could really see that they felt at home in Africa

Sadly week two brought on the illness of many of my team mates, including myself. One by one, we were diagnosed with food poisoning and morale at the worksite reached an astounding low. Nevertheless, the group survived this blow mainly because we did not want to miss out on spending the last few days with the locals and of course the Safari at the end of the week. This was an incentive to recover quickly. There was the Hindi night

to look forward to, where the Indian students on the project prepared their traditional food and taught the rest of the group some Indian dancing and songs. We also had the Matrics (local high school kids) one evening to watch and discuss a video on HIV Aids.

Week two really did fly by because it was thoroughly action packed. Saying goodbye to the community was very difficult but we were able to spend a whole afternoon kissing the kids goodbye before we parted from them. On the same evening, we had a reflection session, during which all the students and teachers on the project wrote a letter addressed to him/herself reflecting on their experience in South Africa. This was followed by a feast with the locals who had prepared our food while on the project and a series of moving goodbye speeches.

Next stop, Krugar National Park! We flew to Johannesburg and then drove to the park the following day. On Safari, we were fortunate enough to have seen the Big Five (Elephant, Giraffe, Lion, Rhino, and Buffalo). The game park experience was an incredible finish to an incredible project. Goodbyes were said with difficulty, but with hopeful conjectures of a reunion as well.

I would recommend this project or any project to anyone because people from all walks of life who took part in it found it to be one of the best twenty days of their lives; everybody learned, grew and made their mark by being a part of the change the world is crying out for.

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