2005 Bob and Margaret Frater Scholarship

by Elizabeth Calabria

I have been lucky enough to have experienced travel to many parts of the world for many purposes; professional development, holiday, visiting friends and work. From all of these wonderful experiences, my time in Africa will always remain dearest to me.

Africa had been on the top of my list as destinations since I was very young. I have always wanted to travel through the ‘dark continent.’ Once I started to explore the idea with real interest, I made my decision to not only enjoy a holiday, but volunteer as a teacher in an area of need as well. After exploring many options, I registered with i-to-i Volunteers Abroad who organised a seven week teaching experience in Kenya for me. The arrangements were all finalised and complete before I departed. I felt honoured to be the recipient of the Bob and Margaret Frater Scholarship and felt proud to be an ambassador for ACU National as I headed off for my great adventure.

After the joys of safari through southern Africa, I made my way to Kenya where I met my host family. As a volunteer through i-to-i, I was welcomed into the home of George and Margaret Ngugi and their three children. George and his family live in Karuri which is approximately 40km north of Nairobi. Not very far from my new home, was Kibathi Primary School. It was a short walk of about twenty minutes up hill along dirt roads that were either impossibly muddy or uncomfortably dusty, depending on the weather. The home I was living in for the seven weeks was comfortable and for most of the time there, I had my own room. The village was quite large and the area itself was rather rural with many small farms (shambas).
Three years ago, the new Kenyan Government followed through with their promise of free primary education for all. This has meant that those who previously could not afford any education could now attend Primary School. Subsequently, the Primary Schools had become full to overflowing resulting in large class sizes and overworked teachers. Kibathi Primary School was one such school. The children who attended Kibathi School came from poor families. Some children were in the habit of taking on afternoon jobs on their way home in the evening to pay for the food they would eat that night. Most families were able to supply a basic uniform for their children consisting of black pants or tunic and white shirts. The footwear varied across the spectrum and in the cold, wet weather, only few children had jackets to keep them dry and warm.

Kibathi Primary School is situated on Banana Hill (named so because of the large number of bananas grown in the area) and consists of eight classes; Standard One [six year olds] through to Standard Eight [fourteen year olds]. The eight classrooms had on average 50 children and were quite cold and dark. There was no glass in the windows and the wind would blow through relentlessly. The children would sit two or three to a seat huddled over the one text book. I was allocated a full teaching load and taught Standard 4 through 7. The timetable resembled a secondary school organisation and I had a variety of classes teaching English, Maths, Science, P.E. and Art. I found the curriculum to be quite prescribed and very teacher orientated. The children had the barest of essentials in writing materials and stationary, but most seemed keen to learn. All the children were trilingual – each of them speaking English, Kiswahili and their own tribal mother tongue. Thankfully, I was able to teach the children in English.

I was welcomed by the staff and once they realised that I was a trained teacher, we had many meaningful discussions about the challenges and joys of teaching. Although my teaching experience in well resourced Sydney primary schools was worlds apart from the reality of Kibathi Primary school, it was amazing to note that we as teachers shared challenges of a similar nature. Here we were in a school desperate for even the most basic of resources, and I found that they faced similar worries about how best to assist children to learn. I spent time talking with one particular teacher who expressed great frustration with one class who ‘could do something one week and would forget it the next’. We talked of ‘real’ learning and how to cope with the pressures of ‘getting through the curriculum’.
Shortly after my arrival at the school, I started to think about ways that I could assist the school. The deputy, Bernard, and I had many discussions about what resources would most benefit the children. After some time, I was able to offer to organise for some glass to be put into the windows. He was overjoyed at the suggestion of installing some transparent sheets into the corrugated iron roofing to allow more light into the rooms. Bernard was keen and gave up several Saturdays to help me order the necessary materials and arrange for workers. The simple solutions of glass and roofing made a world of difference to the children’s comfort in the classrooms. The glass kept the cold wind out and the roofing allowed adequate lighting for the children to see their work.

My school in Sydney, Our Lady Help of Christians Primary School in Epping, got right behind the project. They arranged for several fund-raising days focused on helping Kibathi Primary school. The Catholic Schools Office of the Broken Bay Diocese also contributed a healthy sum to the cause. Through the generosity of the children of OLHC and their families and the Leadership team from the CSO, I was able to fund not only the windows and roofing but also fencing the entire school property. This was a major operation that had the whole village talking.

The seven weeks of teaching went by fairly quickly and during this time I was faced with many challenges mainly because of the many cultural differences. It was not easy being the only white person, ‘muzungu’, living in the village and being surrounded by poverty was often quite disturbing. However, working with a great group of teachers and teaching beautiful happy children balanced out the difficulties.

I was privileged to have the opportunity and am very thankful to Bob and Margaret Frater for sponsoring my experience. Upon reflection, I am very proud of the contributions I was able to make to Kibathi Primary School. Of course, I would not have been able to do what I did without the support of the Frater Scholarship and ACU National, the funds raised by OLHC and the donation from the CSO. While I am filled with pride, I know I am also blessed to have had the opportunity of this international teaching experience. I feel I am richer for it.

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