

Kimchi and kids: Volunteering in Korea

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As soon as I landed in Korea I was overwhelmed. It was different to anything I had known, and I knew I was beginning an exciting yet slightly daunting adventure. I tried to assimilate to the culture by immersing myself in it, both socially and professionally. Whilst there were of course some shocks and issues to overcome, I was astounded by the kindness of others. From my tutors at orientation, to my new friends, to my co-teachers and coworkers, and even random ajummas making room for me on the subway, I quickly realized that this was a place I could feel at home. As I felt more relaxed my confidence grew, and I wanted to not only expand my activities, but give something back.

After initial difficulties finding volunteering, I persevered and secured my first role. Every 2 weeks I went to a local welfare centre called Sinmangaewon, and taught middle school students English. Each week was something different and unexpected. I could plan a lesson for 5 mid level boys and a group of Elementary boys would run in fresh from football practice and full of energy. It was a real challenge to keep them interested and to communicate with them, but I quickly learnt what they were interested in and used to this to my advantage. There isn't much these boys wouldn't study if an angry bird was involved.

After consistently teaching here for a few months I started to feel uneasy. My Christmas presents from home were arriving, reminding me just how lucky I was to have great friends and family at home. I started to wonder if the children I taught could expect the same. The staff at the centre were warm, friendly, and obviously cared deeply for the children, but looking back on my Christmas' at home I wanted them to have that same special experience; patiently waiting to see what Father Christmas would deliver, seeing the shiny wrapping paper, only to crazily unwrap it immediately. I quickly decided that I would post a message in a teacher's facebook group to rally up some gifts for the children however this idea quickly escalated. I asked Raeyoung; the officer who organized my volunteering, and asked if she thought it was possible to provide gifts for more centres and orphanages. She happily agreed to be the middle person between us and the centres, and after asking 2 of my friends to help with this project we decided to expand it even more. The initial reaction of fellow teachers was enough to convince us that there really was a market for a volunteer organization that understood the work and social demands of living and teaching in Korea. We decided to use our existing contacts to create Daegu's Time to Give; a not for profit organisation that aims to create sustainable projects to improve the lives of disadvantaged children in Daegu. We organise fundraising and volunteering, involving the ex-pat community in local projects to improve relationships and engage with the local community. We hope to create sustainable projects that can be long term and continue to provide benefit to the local community irrespective of ctive of the changing ex-pat community.



(Daegu's Time to Give logo) (Daegu's Time to Give team)



My 2 friends and I discussed our strengths and adopted different roles; volunteer co ordination, publicity and events management and fundraising, the latter being my role. Give a Gift appeal was our first event and the first event that I managed.

It officially began in November 2011 but the planning began at least a month before. With help from Raeyoung we were asked to provide gifts for 3 centres. We provided a variety of meeting times and locations throughout November and December, where volunteers (mainly Native teachers but also Koreans and members of the military) collected a gift bag. They were given a choice of who they would like to buy a gift for based on gender and age (babies up to University students; we wanted all residents of the centre to receive a gift and feel included regardless of age). Volunteers then filled the gift bag with 20,000 won worth of gifts. Bags were then returned to us unsealed at a designated meeting time so we could check each bag. The volunteers were unbelievably resourceful with their 20,000 won and the gift bags came back full of toys, clothing, sweets, English books, stationary, letters, and so much more!



We were so happy to find that demand far outnumbered supply; people were filling 2 gift bags each, taking some for their friends, filling them on behalf of family and friends from home etc. It really was so overwhelming to see. With our own research, we found 2 more centres to provide gifts for, taking the total number up to 5 centres.

The task was extremely time consuming with 11 meeting times in total, as well as transportation of all the gift bags to storage, and checking and organizing them. I often dreamt about tartan gift bags, but it was completely worth it. We woke early on Christmas morning, accompanied by Father Christmas, and delivered gifts to 157 children and young adults. It was an unbelievable day. The children were so happy with their gifts, running around showing whoever they could what they had received. Some of the children in the centres even put on a Christmas show for us to say thank you.

It was a challenge to make it all happen. Language barriers made it seem impossible at times but we advertised for a Korean speaking volunteer, and Raeyoung also helped an enormous amount. Logistics were difficult too; storing 157 gifts bags as well as numerous extra gifts meant our apartments became pretty crowded, but the kindness of a landlord meant we had a small storage room. I think the biggest challenge however was time constraints. We all had active social lives which we didn't mind taking a back seat, but beyond that the numerous emails, facebook messages, phone calls, as well as the meeting times, risk assessments, storing and organising tasks and delivery, meant it was sometimes overwhelming. We all banded together though and everything went smoothly with no mistakes. We also funded the project ourselves; initially paying for gift bags, labels etc as well as taxis to transport gifts. In terms of my academic life I found that I was tired from long evenings organizing the project but I also had a renewed energy about Korea. So many people were being so kind and made me so proud to be here. My co workers also got on board with the project which made us much closer. Volunteering with Daegu's Time to Give has also made me much more confident speaking with Korean people and liaising with them in a professional way, which has helped my relationship with co workers and parents.

This event motivated us to provide more events and volunteer opportunities; however we lacked the funds to do so. So I decided to host a Valentines speed dating event in February. The cost of the event was 10,000 won per person. In total we raised 400,000 won, the majority of which we used to buy English books and games. We coincided the delivery of these books with an arts and crafts and games session for the children at the centre. The remainder of the money was spent on other Daegu's Time to Give events. For example, we took a group of children and volunteers to a baseball match, we provided socks and underwear to another centre, and in October we threw a Halloween party for Sinmangaewon. 3 volunteers attended the party with me, which included arts and crafts, games, face painting and lots of sweets!



(English books bought with speed dating funds)



(Daegu's Time to Date)

Daegu's Time to Give is still very active, continuing to place volunteers on one off and continuous teaching and play volunteer sessions. We are also doing another Give a Gift Appeal this year, a second speed dating event in 1 week, as well as cooking classes. Aside from Daegu's Time to Give, I also enrolled and attended an orientation to be part of

Keimyung University's Cross Cultural Awareness Program (CCAP), which is affiliated with UNESCO. On a volunteer basis, I attended an elementary school and taught children about my country, including cooking activities, games and crafts, which provided me with good teaching experience.



(CCAP class)

I am also vice leader of the UK team in the DMOE Global festival. As vice leader, I am required to attend extra meetings with the leader to order materials, organize schedules, finalise activities and assign roles. Initial brainstorming sessions were very useful in providing me with new and fresh ideas for my own classes at school as well as tips on teaching. I also like to volunteer to do extra activities in school to keep the children interested such as a pen pal program with some of my friends and an English diary

Now I am coming to the end of my 2 years in Korea I am so glad that I have volunteered. I have met so many people, had so many unique experiences and hope to have made a positive difference in a city that I have gladly called home for 2 years. I am so happy that someone will take over Daegu's Time to Give and continue it's work when we have left.

I am sad to leave Korea and also an organization that I have invested a lot of time and care in, but I am excited to travel, and plan to volunteer on health and youth projects in India before returning to England to work in the nonprofit sector. My teaching and volunteer experiences in Korea have confirmed and reinforced my career goals, and I'm looking forward to taking what I have learnt in Korea with me onto my career in England.