

Beyond Teaching

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Why do people volunteer? To most people, a volunteer is “someone who contributes time to help others with no expectation of pay or other material benefit for themselves.” When I started volunteering, I thought I was helping society. As I grew older I realized that not only was I helping those in need, but I was also benefiting from the experience. Volunteering gives me an overwhelming sense of accomplishment and self realization that is beyond any explanation I can offer. I realized that if you encourage education and knowledge within the people that you are helping - whether it be children or adults - you will open a world to them that is full of possibilities beyond their imagination. It will also open up a world to you that you never knew existed.

I came to Korea to teach English. When I arrived in Hongcheon I was unaware of any volunteer opportunities in this town. So I looked for opportunities. I discovered many students at my school are from the local orphanage so I started volunteering there. The students loved having us around but they were embarrassed that I knew they were orphans. I did not want to make them uncomfortable in their own home so I stopped volunteering.

I was walking home when one of my students grabbed my hand, dragged me down the road and before I knew it I found myself at this place called the Vision Center with kids running around, laughing, fighting, learning. I spent about 2 hours there and immediately fell in love with the kids and the teachers. The Vision Centre is run by the church, they provide an after-school service for children whose parents have died, are too poor to look after them, sexually abuse them, or have alcohol problems. The children go to the center after school every day. The center has 4 Korean volunteers that assist the children with homework, provide recreational activities and give them dinner. I have been volunteering there for one year three months now. My focus is not on teaching the kids English; rather it is to provide a space where students can have fun in a relaxed and comfortable environment.

I face three main challenges at the centre. Firstly, most of the children have serious emotional problems and become extremely angry very quickly. Swearing, tantrums and tears are the norm. It is hard to find the middle ground between disciplining them and allowing them to release their frustrations. I become frustrated as well because I wanted to help and comfort them but because of the language barrier it was very hard to do so. Thus, I decided to take Korean language classes. I took classes for three months. I learnt that even though the children and I could not understand each other verbally we developed a relationship with each other through body language and especially hugs. This form of communication was much stronger than any verbal communication. As I spent more time with them our relationship grew stronger, I really do love each and every one of them. They started seeing me less as a teacher and more as a bigger sister or a friend (which is not a good thing when it comes to discipline). I started seeing them less as students and more as my children. They were one of my main factors in whether I should resign at my school or move to another city.

Secondly, I found it is hard to keep their attention. They are exhausted by the time I arrive, they have just eaten dinner, and the last thing they want, is to be sitting having an *English*

lesson. This pushed me to be more creative. Thus, I started a Running Man theme (Korean variety show), where there are spies, missions etc, and the kids absolutely love it! The kids use English without even realizing it, just so that they can understand the activity better. I have also started a Saturday program, where once a month we take the kids on an outing: to a temple, picnic, park, camping etc.

The second program that I am involved in is a charity campaign that I started called SEEK (The South Encouraging Education and Knowledge). In my time spent in Korea I have observed the considerable amount of materials that are unutilized; from furniture lying on the sidewalk, to lost and unclaimed stationary in schools. From my past experience I know that there is a great need in South African public schools for educational materials. This great deficit has a negative impact on student's ability to cope with their studies. This leaves students discouraged and ultimately hopeless. The combination of these factors grew my interest in collecting and sending materials to South Africa. I researched more into the feasibility of this project and it led me to SEEK. My ultimate goal is to provide these schools with more amenities i.e. clean running water, classrooms.

From the Korean side it was easy. I emailed the Superintendent of Gangwon office of Education and requested his assistance in organizing schools to help with this project. The superintendent referred me to the Superintendent at Hongcheon Office of Education. I met with them and requested the help of elementary and middle schools throughout Hongcheon. For the first collection we managed to pack 70 boxes worth of goods. We acquired the help of the parents association to pack the goods which consisted of clothes, shoes, stationary, notebooks, crayons, musical instruments, storybooks etc. This project is fairly new; we have just sent our first lot of goods to South Africa. The goods have arrived in South Africa and are being distributed to the schools as I write. I have paid for the delivery of the first batch of goods by myself. We still have 36 more boxes to send. If I am successful for this award I will use the money to send the remaining boxes.

From the South African side, we needed to get a charity tax exemption certificate or else we would have to pay taxes for the goods. I contacted the South African Embassy in Korea to ask for their assistance but they said there is nothing they can do to help us. I then contacted the head of tax and clearance customs in Busan and requested his help. Together with the help of Mr Cho, Jo Min Jung (my co-teacher) and Dare to Dream (a charity in South Africa) we managed to acquire a tax charity exemption form and send the goods to South Africa. We then had to pack, count, number, weigh and measure every box. The South African government requested that we describe every item for example shoe; the sole, color, texture, material, brand etc. Jo Min Jung, Mr Park, the supervisor at Hongcheon office of Education along with the parents association, Dare to Dream and Hongcheon schools have helped me make this campaign a success and I will be forever grateful for their help.

My volunteer work has brought me closer to the children and the community in which I work and live. I know them on a personal level, I know their background and they know that I am interested in their lives beyond the classroom. Volunteering has helped me to understand and react appropriately to the children's behavior in class. I think the only part that I question is my response to the children. Many of the children from the vision centre go to my school. Thus, I found that I have a softer spot for these children and sometimes favor them more. However, this is a problem that I am aware of and I am working on changing it.

I have been in Korea for a year and six months it is my second home. I am hoping to do my masters in child psychology in Korea next year through the NIIED program. This is my passion; from a young age I knew that I wanted to help society. Korea is a good place to start as Korean people have had a history of hardship. I believe even though Korea is in a good place now they will be able to relate and willingly help my campaign. In the future, I want to develop a system where these children can have a cultural exchange program, possibly via skype and as they develop maybe even get sponsors to send them to South Africa. I want to provide a space for these children where they feel their dreams can be made possible, where they are able to release their frustrations without feeling judged, where they feel loved. I want to build their confidence in themselves so they can achieve anything they want in life.



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