



2014 EPIK Life/Volunteer Video Clip Contest
(Bronze Prize)

The Kuensaem centre for North Korean Refugees: The English Outreach Program

By Katie Burke

My name is Katie Burke and I am from the West of Ireland. I have been living in Seoul, Korea for almost two years and I have loved every minute of it. One of the most precious experiences in my time in Korea has been teaching North Korean refugees. I have submitted a video for the EPIK Volunteer Video Clip Contest 2014 about my experiences working in the Kuensaem centre for North Korean refugees. I didn't bring any recording devices into the centre and I have blurred out the faces of the children in the photos I will be showing in the clip. I have done this for many reasons but I hope that you can still get a feel for the centre and the fantastic work that is done there.

Last November, I began to volunteer my weekends teaching North Korean defectors and their families. My reasoning behind starting to volunteer was because I absolutely love teaching and I wanted to do something other than going out every weekend. My reasons for starting to volunteer may not have been full of great intentions but to be honest I was very naive about a lot of things regarding the North and South of Korea, when I first arrived. This experience has taught me so much, made me educate myself on Korea's history and current political climate, made me a better teacher and has been really fulfilling. I am honest with people when they ask why I started to volunteer because from talking to many others I have found that my initial mindset is very common. I think that people have an idea that only 'certain' people volunteer and that they are not able to - this is a thought process I would really like to see change. Anybody can volunteer and I guarantee that you won't regret it and your reasons for continuing to volunteer will be very different from why you started!

North Koreans are marginalized in South Korea and begin their lives in an extremely

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competitive environment at a massive disadvantage. The Kuensaem centre tries to give the defectors a better chance at success by providing personalised classes dependent on the needs of the refugees. This experience has made me appreciate the correlation between education and opportunities.

From my experience in the Kuensaem centre, I have learned that I particularly enjoy developing policy and procedures focused on improving the environment for both the student and the teacher. Unfortunately as it is an organisation based on volunteers, people come and go and the students are given limited consistency with teachers and their lessons. On my first day, I was put with the most recent defectors and I saw that they were really struggling. I started by sitting down and making a curriculum that would work through the basics. While the organisation only asks for you to give two weekends a month, I went more frequently so that I could build a rapport with the students. I bought folders for their work and a separate folder for their teacher. After each class, I would leave a note about what the students learned so that if for any reason I was unable to make a class the teacher replacing me would know where the students were in their curriculum. The system that I developed was rolled out throughout the organisation so that now it is mandatory for all teachers to write a brief report on what they covered with each student after their lesson. I believe that this has brought more consistency to how the students are taught and it also makes it easier for the volunteers to know what they should be teaching the students. The coordinator has recently asked me to help her develop a curriculum for our kindergarten students. She has also asked for me to maintain the centre the weekends that she is unable to attend. Volunteering has made me a more confident teacher, given me skills that I did not have or think I had previously and has made me more practiced in how to deal with last minute situations.

Volunteering has never negatively affected my professional life but there are many difficulties with volunteering. Each weekend is a weekly struggle, trying to gather enough volunteers and organising a centre when you are never sure how many students and volunteers will show up is very hard. I feel that the Kuensaem's 'English Outreach Program' is still a growing program that needs more native English teachers helping to form a more efficient and effective system.

A personal heartache I suffer is with my Irish accent. The Irish are famous for not being able to pronounce the 'th' sound, and I, unfortunately, suffer this affliction. Occasionally the two girls that I work with have adopted this pronunciation and while I can hear their mistake and I try to correct them, I think I may have given them an Irish linguistic failing!

The centre is not all work and no play - for different western holidays we have cultural classes where we teach the students about the holiday and/or we play games. Our sponsors also occasionally give the most dedicated volunteers treats as a thank you for the time that they donate to the centre. Last Christmas, we were brought to a Korean TV network station where we got backstage access to the Korean drama sets and we also got great seats at a K-pop show that had many different acts. At the time I didn't know who G-Dragon was, I bitterly regret not taking photos of how close we were to him to show to my kids in school - I may have actually gained at least one cool point with my sixth graders! We are also sometimes treated by our sponsors to pizza or cake or candy at lunch time in the centre which always makes for lots of happy kids and volunteers!

Suzanna Scholte, a famous American human rights activist and winner of the Seoul Peace Prize (2008) and the Walter Judd Freedom Award (2010) visited our centre this year. She is the president of the Defense Forum Foundation and she is also the Vice Co-chair of the U.S Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. I met her along with two other consistent volunteers which was a great honour. After a short presentation about the centre we along went to a North Korean restaurant and got to talk to her about her work.

The most memorable time for me in the centre was last Christmas' show. There are three particular memories that stick out for me. The first one was when we gave the children the task of drawing a picture about what they want to be when they grow up (they were also learning a speech to go along with their picture), there was an interesting result. All of the children are divided into different rooms and yet when we put all of the pictures together, the students who had more recently defected to the South used only three colours, brown, grey and black; while the students who have been in South Korea

longer used a variety of bright colours. I can't say why this happened but it was really interesting to see and made me realise that I want to learn more about how children acquire different skills.

The second memory is when one of my girls got on stage to say the one line she learned about her picture; at this stage she was still mastering the alphabet. Her line "When I grow up I want to be a lawyer", was terrifying to her but she was adamant to do the same as all of the other children. When she got on stage she locked eyes with me while she said the line. I was mouthing the line to her to try to help her and while she struggled, I think I was as proud as her mother was in that moment! Afterwards when we were all eating the food that the parents and grandparents had prepared she came to me with an orange she had peeled for me. It was a small gesture that made me completely fall in love with her; I'm devastated at the thoughts of leaving as I type this! The last memory I have from the show was when we got on stage to sing Arirang with the students (I have shown a short clip of this). I had never heard about Arirang before it was given to me to learn for this event. With the exception of listening to it a few times on you tube while trying to learn the chorus, I would say that my first experience of hearing it properly was at this event. Getting on stage and singing with the students and seeing the reactions of the parents and grandparents to the song, a song so famous and precious to both the North and South of Korea was something I didn't understand at the time but I definitely felt and appreciated. I am so grateful for these memories and all of the other memories I have had from my time in the Kuensaem centre.

After a year of teaching in Korea, I realised that not only did I love my job, but I have also come to love myself as a teacher. While there are aspects to the role that can be physically and mentally draining, I find the rewards of teaching to surpass any difficulties. I feel consistently challenged and I am constantly learning new information and skills. Teaching in an elementary school and volunteering has made me want to become a better teacher so I have decided to do a masters in Education. My hope is to one day work with NGOs that work to make education more accessible to those less fortunate.