

Home

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This article is by one of the students on her first LDWP project.

My home is a whitewashed compound at the top of a hill with a little dirt courtyard right in the middle; a place surrounded by noise, laughter, activity and work; a place where love exists in the smiles and songs of all those who live there. It's a place a long way away from where I am now; nestled in the Ugandan countryside at the side of a red dust road; it doesn't have mod cons or running water and electricity is temperamental to say the least, but I cannot imagine a time filled more with happiness than the five weeks I spent there with my Lasallian family and a community more generous in spirit than I ever thought possible.

The aim of Lasallian Developing World Projects is to improve the provision of education in the developing world whilst also providing British teenagers with the opportunity to broaden their horizons, challenge their perspectives and experience a culture entirely different to their own. This summer I and the eleven others in my group were lucky enough to spend five weeks in Kitoba, a small village in the Western region of Uganda, helping to build a hostel for sixty girls attending the local secondary school, St Andrew,s High School.

We soon realised the importance of the hostel to the local community. In rural Uganda, as in much of Africa, it is common for young people, especially girls, to miss out on schooling because of the long distances they have to walk each day. During an impromptu tour of the secondary school we were shown the classroom used to sleep members of the senior four class; the candidates being presented for their O-level examinations. It was a far cry from the comfort of our own bedrooms in the UK; with mismatched clothes hanging from the ceiling and a row of old mattresses and blankets covering the floor. Further up the hill, a crumbling and dilapidated building proved to be the current hostel; overcrowded, it was dark even in daylight and in need of both paint and restoration. It was easy to see that the new building would make a difference.



The hostel project did not solely provide a place for the girls to sleep but also some much needed work for the masons of the local building company Kitoba Construction; an extremely organised outfit, presided by our ever smiling engineer Patrick, and kept in check by the cheery foreman of the same name. From the minute we stepped onto the building site we were made to feel welcome; it didn't seem to matter how little we knew about laying bricks or spreading mortar

– our masons were always on hand to help and advise – dishing out pet names and teaching us some of the local dialect along the way. Despite the heat of the sun, the building site, with its spectacular view right across to the Congolese border, will hold special memories for everyone on the Ugandan project. Whether it was James wielding a large stick at watching children, Julius singing Apologise for the tenth time in a row or Godfrey's cheeky jokes; the

laughter and enthusiasm we shared with our masons and cement mixers meant that both the building and our friendships quickly took shape. It was perhaps only in the third week, when work dried up at the hostel site (Kitoba being so productive as to have new classrooms also under construction) and the time came for some of the builders to move on to Kampala that we realised just how much our masons-come-mentors had given us in the way of enjoyment with their particular knack of seeing the funny side of every situation. Although the group didn't quite see the hostel finished, we were invited by the building company and priests to provide a name. In memory of the songs we sang whilst passing bricks and the laughter we shared with our new found friends, the Happy Days Hostel was born.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the project came from an apparent disaster: the collapse of the roof in the third week. Instead of the planned five days teaching, those who wanted were able to spend two weeks in the local primary and secondary school imparting knowledge in subjects of their choosing. No

one in the group seemed too daunted by classes of sixty pupils or more and everyone tried their hand at something; whether it was art with senior two, poetry with senior three, or (early morning and late night) biology lessons with senior four. Adjusting to the Ugandan education system with its 1950s teaching style, corporal punishment and rote learning was a challenge but the bright, interested and intelligent young people whom we met inspired in us all a desire to find innovative methods of explanation - from demonstrating cell division using senior four pupils as chromosomes, to acting out fairytales with primary seven or devising similes about everything in sight. Realising the spark of understanding in the eyes of students who previously were lost, seeing hands shoot up in the air when questions were asked or simply knowing that everyone stayed awake for an entire lesson was really rewarding; but even more so was getting to know such smart and enthusiastic young people so well. When the time came to leave Kitoba it was hard for each of us to say goodbye to our favourite classes and students; they asked that we would not forget them, not realising how great an impression they had made on each one of us.

Team Uganda was an incredible group to be a part of. Every single person on the project was so committed to the Lasallian mission and had so many different things to offer that we very quickly developed a strong sense of community. There were of course the good-natured jokes about DEET saturated rooms, salty scrambled egg and smelly project members; but my overwhelming memory of the group will be the way in which everyone was always looking out for everyone else. Reflections became an important part of our collective journey and from the thoughts and honesty of others we were all challenged and moved in turn. We shared lots of tears, but also lots of hilarity and it would be nice to think that everyone came back a little different for the experiences which we had together.

A Lasallian project is full of contrasts; in Uganda the unhurried pace of countryside life was directly juxtaposed to the hustle and bustle of tourist sites and the simplicity of the villages seemed unfathomable when we wandered the luxurious streets of Kampala. Although our compound quickly became the centre of our universe, weekend trips and care packages from home often reminded us of the very different world beyond the red dust road and green trees, causing each of us to feel, a little more keenly, the gulf between rich and poor and to see a little more clearly the disparities that exist between the developed and developing world.

The children who came to see us at the compound or building site seemed so smart in their pink and black uniforms but looking a little closer we noticed the tears that had never been mended, the bare feet and the different coloured threads used to darn shirts that could not be replaced. Kitoba was not an affluent village – instead of shillings, mangoes and potatoes were brought as an offering to Sunday mass – yet it was vibrant, happy, and full of hope. It was hard to marry the western idea of poverty, so often associated with hardship and suffering, to the optimism of our hosts; although traditional riches may have been lacking, the wealth of love displayed by all those we met seemed so much more precious than the pounds we carried in our wallets and money belts.

It was very easy to believe that our rural home was the perfect village, untouched by the tragedies so often associated with the African continent but behind the smiles of the children and the singing of the choir were untold stories of suffering. In a rare sombre moment, Patrick told us of the impact that the AIDS virus had had on the local community: “While” he said, “some are infected, everyone is affected.” Through the stories of lost parents and orphaned children we came to realise the strength of the village in which we were living, the resilience of its people, and their sheer, overwhelming faith in God’s plan. Our daily gripes and troubles began to seem so completely insignificant in comparison to the hardships borne by those we encountered and I think we all began to realise, if we hadn’t before, just how much we have to be thankful for.

“Let his kingdom come,
Let his will be done,
Let us be filled with love,
As in heaven high above”

is the refrain sung in Kitoba every Sunday during the Our Father. Nowhere could the love of Jesus be more present than in the village which welcomed us. Although the clay bricks of the happy days hostel may fade, lose their colour and crack, the bright smiles of the Ugandan people, their unending generosity and constant care will always hold as prominent a place in our hearts. There’s a Lasallian saying “They gave me so much more than I could ever have given them”; the priests, builders and young people of Kitoba would often thank us for the work we were doing, but it always should have been the other way around.

As we left our bedrooms, kitchen and compound for the last time, Victoria, one of the girls from the parish, said to each of us in turn “Tell your parents they have a daughter; I am your sister.” We may have helped provide a building, but in Kitoba our project group found a home.