

DISCOVERING THE PASSION OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Teaching pre-schoolers as a volunteer in Ghana's capital Accra in a commune without electricity and running water stirred a girl's desire to help - so she turned it into a career.

Volunteering is a passion but it is not for the faint of heart. It tickled my itchy feet for the first time in 2006 and has since gone on to change my life. I am currently listed as a full-time volunteer with AmeriCorps.

After I graduated, I didn't feel entirely confident about submersing myself into the "working world." I craved new things, a new adventure, a new environment, and new people.

The organisation I went with was Student Travel and Exposure South Africa - STAESA. The price was right, the programme was flexible and I was ready to go. The application process via email flew by, and before I knew it, it was October and I was on a flight to Ghana, West Africa.

I had spent most of my free time inquiring about this country that was so foreign to me. Before departing, I read how I should prepare myself not to eat or greet anyone with my left hand - a taboo practice in the Ghanaian culture, as the left hand is considered dirty.

There was a possibility I might be living in less than desirable conditions for average Westerners, without electricity or running water. Even after all my research, I still wasn't sure what to expect, volunteering full-time for 6 weeks, building an orphanage, or how I would adapt to my first experience leaving the United States, my family and friends.

I did know, however, that whatever happened, the act of

making a difference for the greater good of somebody other than myself, and fulfillment of what I was about to do would be something that would change me.

The humid air and plethora of new smells invigorated my senses immediately after stepping off the plane.

"Akwaaba!" - Accra welcomed me with a large mass of people right outside the airport and I was greeted by two strangers: my new host-father, a Pentecost pastor and a volunteer from Germany.

They guided me to a car that smoked as much as a campfire and drove to me to my new home on the outskirts of Accra. Children appeared from every corner and it took me a few days to figure out who actually lived in the commune I was staying in.

Living with a family gave me the full experience of becoming truly immersed into their way of life. I was accepted as part of the family immediately, and during Sunday Service, the pastor introduced me as his new daughter, and gave me the African name Akosua.

◀.....▶ ‘Helping to build an orphanage was an honour for me’ ◀.....▶

Having a traditional home-made Ghanaian meal for breakfast and dinner every day and learning to cook the meals was an absolute treat. The local kids took us around the little nooks and crannies of the neighbourhood. Some places and opportunities I may not have seen adventuring around on my own.

My role as volunteer was to teach four-year-olds numbers, the alphabet and some geography at a local daycare centre called Little Angels. With the expected activities that occupied my time, I also ran into opportunities I never thought I would be apart of.

My host family had purchased a plot of land with plans to build an orphanage and



they needed extra support and energy to continue and make the dream a reality. We volunteers; me and a 25-year-old from Alaska as well as a 19-year-old from Germany, pitched in to help.

Together we measured the land, drew up plans for a kitchen, dormitories, shower and toilet stall, pantry, volunteer housing, office, first aid room and underground well for water.

It took a few weeks to get everything in order but when my time in Accra was over, all the bricks were made and the ground breaking had begun.

I feel so honoured to have contributed to jump-starting a project that touched so many lives. A surprise opportunity that was possible because of the wonderful people that I was surrounded by.

Seemingly on a whim I made the decision to go to Africa and volunteer my time and funds to broaden my horizon and experience something out of my comfort zone. I had the time of my life and left Ghana with grand memories, friends, extended family and the fulfillment I would have never found anywhere else if I tried.

Clockwise from top: Laura playing with host-sister Shadé; making bricks for the orphanage; commune in Accra and teaching at Little Angels. Top and bottom photo: CoKa; centre and left: LaHe

FIND OUT MORE

To see what Laura is up to now with AmeriCorps, visit her blog www.lauraheisig.weebly.com

Student Travel and Exposure South Africa www.staesa.org

For internships abroad, see www.internabroad.com

For volunteering abroad, see www.volunteerabroad.com

Writer Profile



Name: Laura Heisig
Age: 24
Loved volunteering in Africa so much that she is now a full-time volunteer with AmeriCorps NCCC.