



Cheshire Services Volunteer Project

Experiencing the Cheshire home

Anna Larsson, Volunteer at Cheshire, Spring 2011

Imagine being forbidden to go to school or even to see other people. Imagine being hidden away from the rest of the world. This is the background that many children at the Cheshire home have.

Due to the strange view of disabilities that exists in many poor countries, children suffer in isolation. In Ethiopia, many people think that disabilities are curses from god, placed upon a family. As a result, the families don't dare show their disabled children in public. They don't want to reveal "the curse". These children don't have the chance to live as normal children: to play with friends, or go to school. This fact really upsets me, and it's one of the reasons why I became interested in the Cheshire Services.



When the children come to Cheshire they really get a chance to progress, both psychically and psychologically. Cheshire helps them by giving rehabilitation and accommodation. Basically, the children get the chance to be children.

The first time I entered the Cheshire compound, I met happy, playing kids. I met laughter, greetings, and curious eyes, although I'm sure I was even more curious. They wondered who these "ferenjjs" (foreigners) were, and I was curious over what was going to happen next.



Even if I've been to Ethiopia before, this was a new experience for me. The Cheshire home is a peaceful place, with a lot of nature. It's located out in the countryside (still near to Addis Ababa), surrounded by mountains. Beautiful flowers grow everywhere and you breathe fresh air. You can see deer wandering around in the bushes and you have to watch out so that the monkeys don't steal your food. Cheshire felt like a really exotic place for me, and I really enjoyed it.

During the time my friend Kaj (the other volunteer) and I were at Cheshire, they didn't have a teacher, so that became our mission. This was a big, but fun challenge to face. Most of the children had never been to school before and some had, and we had children between the ages of five and twenty. We started by dividing them into groups and then we tried different methods during our



lessons. Mostly we played games and listened to music with the children at the same time as we taught them English. Our goal was to make school fun for them so that they would continue when they got home. Sometimes it was hard to teach due to the language-barrier, but we tried to use sign-language and a lot of pictures. We even learned some Amharic (an Ethiopian language)!

The position I had at Cheshire was very good – I got the opportunity to teach the children and to spend time with them. During a normal day, we had lessons and then time to play, draw, do handicrafts

and to talk to them. I really became very fond of the children; after a while they felt like family and my own brothers and sisters. They're just so full of energy and happiness; it's hard not to love them. Being at Cheshire for two months allowed me to experience many things. I saw people who arrived there crawling, and then a few months later they learned how to walk. To be able to see this is just an amazing, indescribable feeling because you can really see the positive effect on the children. Many of them came with low self-esteem and after just a few weeks they blossomed. At Cheshire the children get the opportunity to go to school, which makes them understand that they are clever and able. They see that they aren't alone with their disabilities and they gain self-confidence after their operations.

In spite of this, it's not always an easy journey for the children. They have to face some big challenges. First of all, it's not easy to be away from your family for several months when you're only a child. It's also a struggle to deal with the pain from the surgeries sometimes. It takes a lot of courage, which is a quality the children learn at Cheshire. They learn how to be brave and to be independent. Through these rough times, however, they have each other, and that's lovely to see. They all become like a huge family of brothers and sisters who look after one another and the staff become their parents during their stay.

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I'm truly grateful for this experience, it's been an invaluable memory. I got to be a part of these children's journeys; I got to be a supporting arm for them. I also got to see the Ethiopian hospitality from the workers at Cheshire. They made Kaj and I feel at home immediately, and they were always there to help.

Now, when I'm leaving in just one day, I realise how much I will miss this place and the people here. It feels like I'm leaving a part of myself behind, but at the same time I'm leaving with a whole lot of good experiences that will affect the rest of my life.

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