



Cheshire Services Volunteer Project

Two months at the Cheshire

Kaj Norberg, Volunteer at Cheshire, Spring 2011

It didn't take me long after landing at Bole International Airport until I had, or at least thought I had, an understanding of Ethiopia and its people. On first sight, as well as at a closer look, this country is a place of great differences and inequalities.

A short drive will bring you past businessmen with their leather briefcases and expensive cell-phones, looking important, while they try to ignore the people lying about in the streets, too sick or hungry to even move. You will see skyscrapers high enough to challenge those of any major western city, with glass windows glittering in the sun, and just next to it a handful of shacks – five flimsy sheets of corrugated steel housing a family of seven. This may very well make you uneasy, as it did with me.



After two nights in Addis Ababa, a capital with a population matching that of Sweden, my home country, Anna (my fellow volunteer) and I were driven out to Cheshire Services in Menagesha. It was like stepping into a different world. The exhaust fumes that cover you after five minutes of walking on the streets of Addis were nowhere to be seen, my lungs thoroughly enjoying the fresh air.

After quickly throwing our heavy bags in the Yellow House (the house of late emperor Haile Selassie's daughters) we went to meet with the children for the first time. I won't lie: I was really nervous, the questions piling up in my head. Seeing all the wheelchairs and crutches, with every other leg in a cast, only fuelled my apprehension. How was I supposed to run around and play football with these kids? What could I do to help them, not being a physiotherapist, or the like? I didn't know it yet, but during the following two months I was definitely going to get answers to my questions, along with a lesson in humanity, and heaps of new friends.

Getting to know the kids was easy

Getting to know the kids was easy. Living in a Swedish city or the countryside of Ethiopia, sitting in a wheelchair or not – none of this matters, children are always children, and hopefully always will be. Their natural curiosity made the arrival of us, the “ferenjjs”, the most exciting event in quite some time, and their friendliness soon made us connect. The following weeks passed quickly, far too quickly.

As Cheshire was without a teacher when we arrived, Anna and I took on that role, trying to teach the kids English. This certainly proved a challenge. Not only did the children vary in age, but the school experience was high with some, and in many cases non-existent. The inevitable language barrier also became a hindrance to our teaching. Our solution to this was soliciting the few English-speaking students as translators, as well as using lots and lots of pictures, sounds and charades. In the meantime, we did our best to improve our Amharic, although progress was painfully slow.



One episode I recall is sitting on my favourite spot on the stairs, trying to build up my vocabulary. The children were flocking around me, everybody attempting to teach me something new, Amharic, or Oromo, it didn't matter, everyone chimed in with whatever they thought I ought to know, all at the same time! Even though I didn't learn a lot that day, we all had a great deal of fun, and that is something I'd prefer any day.

When not in class, there were always things to do. The two recovery rooms always exploded in cheerful greetings when I entered, and teaching them new games was fun. Newly operated and bedbound as they were, their eagerness to learn new ways to pass the time made them grateful students.

The grassy lawn was always full of activity, and I could easily find someone to kick around a ball with. My initial dread that the children in wheelchairs and on crutches would not be able to partake in this was soon gone. If you can't move without a wheelchair, you simply play goalkeeper, or place yourself in a strategic position on the field. No problem whatsoever. The youngsters on crutches were another matter. Instead of letting the walking aids become obstacles, they learned how to use them to dribble the ball. All of a sudden your opponent had four legs, and if you've ever met a four-legged player on the football field, you know you're more than likely to get tricked far away from the ball.

Another worry I was preoccupied with the first couple of days was that of my usefulness. During the two months of my stay, those thoughts vanished completely. Sure, on bad days, when you can't get the children to stop fighting, and nobody listens



when you try to teach, it's hard to keep a smile on your face. But when you get over those rough patches, you realize you actually are helping the kids. Maybe not as visibly as with the tremendous work of the physiotherapists, but years of maltreatment due to their disabilities certainly affects the children psychologically.

By treating them like the equals they are, not only showing them our love, but also telling them off when they do wrong, I hope we let them know they have the same rights as the physically able, as well as the same responsibilities.

The psychological and physical development is something I have been noticing all along, and it gives me enormous pleasure to watch them open up. Starting out literally crawling on the ground, with no self-confidence to talk of, and after a – under the circumstances – short period both being able to walk and talk, full of self-esteem.

This may be the emotionally strongest part of the experience that is Cheshire, and I'm sure to be taking it with me in the future, a reminder of the humanity and hope that has its home in Menagesha. Leaving the place now, I'm going to miss it a lot, but I dream of one day walking down the street, and meeting one of the kids walking the other way, busy living life just the way he or she wants to.

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