

## Our visit to the Kinamba Community Project



We have just returned from four magical weeks of volunteering at the Kinamba Community Project. We are a family of five: I am a teacher and Nancy is a social worker, and our three children are Frank (aged 10), Constance (aged 8) and Ned (aged 5).

It is safe to say that we did not really know what to expect when we arrived, or how we were going to be able to help, especially with our three children in tow! But Epiphanie and her staff and the children at the project welcomed us with open arms and quickly showed us the ropes. We mainly worked with the primary school students, who attend the project in the mornings, delivering art projects and games and activities to add to the variety of their schedule. There were many highlights. Amongst them we would pick out the activity where the children were given half of a photograph of their face and were then asked to complete the portrait; manic games of ‘British Bulldog’ and ‘Stuck in the Mud’ on the space at the back of the project building; and the creation of packs of Uno cards, which the children then learnt to play.



It was fascinating to see how our children fitted into all of this. They did initially find it all a bit overwhelming – but thanks to the kindness and good will of the Kinamba staff and student helpers, they quickly overcame their initial nerves. Football is Frank’s obsession, and one of the helpers, Patrick, took Frank under his wing, so that we rarely saw him in the mornings, as he was up at the football pitch all morning joining in with the children’s Sports sessions. Connie helped us with our art sessions and game sessions, where she often linked up with Divine,

another lovely student helper. Ned was slightly more maverick – but he often joined in with our activities, or was otherwise entertained by yet another brilliant student helper, Daniella, who had a seemingly endless appetite for playing his imaginary games, involving Harry Potter scenarios and Care Bears!



It was a pleasure just to be around the project and see how it worked. We particularly enjoyed Patrick's early-morning keep-fit sessions (which pushed my middle-aged body well past its limit); and watching the beautiful traditional dancing. But just in general there was such a happy sense of purpose around the place, and the children were clearly having a wonderful time in the safe and supportive environment that the project provides.

During our time there, we slowly learnt about what a difference the project is making to the lives of the students that attend it. Without the project it is unlikely that any of the children that attend it would be able to complete their schooling. However the project's sponsorship programme has allowed remarkable stories to unfold. We heard about ex-students now studying medicine in Kenya or about to embark on a photography degree in the UK; we heard about the success of student helpers, like Patrick, at secondary school and their ambitions for higher education, as well as witnessing their impressive personal qualities whilst they went about the daily business of running the various activities; and we heard about the difficult home lives of many of the current students, and how the project provides a safe haven for them and a chance to discover their own talents.

We are so thankful to everyone we met during our experience. Epiphanie was wonderful from start to finish, running the project with good humour, compassion and joy. She has a wonderful relationship with the children and fills the place with a positive energy. The project staff feel more like a family than colleagues. Francoise, Jeanette and Bea ensure that everything runs smoothly, always smiling as they go about their busy days. The student helpers were brilliant. They run the activities with enthusiasm and enterprise and act as wonderful role models for the younger children.

Our final two days were a wonderful end to our time at the project. Frank came up with the idea to have a talent show, and so our time ended with a showcase of the children's own interests and talents – from football trickery to magic tricks to break-dancing to traditional Rwandan dancing. All of this was cheered on by their classmates and the project staff. The final act consisted of heartfelt speeches from ourselves, Epiphanie and students from the project and a massive farewell photo at the gate. It was hard to leave – and we hope we will be back again in the future!



