

VOLUNTEERS ABROAD TO SELF DISCOVERY

Iara M.Bua: "How do you feel about your 20 year old daughter going on a three months cultural exchange program to Canada? - I feel sad and glad", asserts Helen Jonsen, mother of the Exchange volunteer Nicole Maclambo.

An opportunity to learn about others and thereby discover yourself. That is the main goal of the nine South African guys and girls, who went to Canada to do volunteer work in Sunshine Coast during August. They are part of a volunteer Exchange programme offered by the Volunteer Centre in Claremont in partnership with Canada World Youth. The volunteers come from different parts of Cape Town. They will be doing voluntary work in Sunshine Coast with 9 Canadian youth known as their counterparts during 3 months, until 15th November. The group hopes that their exchange will develop an awareness of the Millenniums Development Goals at grassroots level both in Sunshine Coast and Athlone.

On their return from Canada, the South Africans, accompanied by the 9 Canadians, will be doing volunteer work at NGO's in their host community of Athlone. They will live with families until February in different neighbourhoods of Athlone, developing 3 focus areas: HIV awareness, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse.

What is the main goal of the Project?

"To create self empowered individuals ", says Isgak Stemmet. Project supervisor of the Volunteer Centre's Cape Town Group. "My main challenge, together with my Canadian counterpart is keeping the young volunteers with the opportunity to experience personal growth and the positive aspects of intercultural diversity. This journey is one of enlightenment and understanding with reference to the Millennium Development Goals also implementing plans and programs that combat some of the prevalent social ills in our community. Making sure that they receive the maximum benefit from the programme that has been designed in the spirit of non formal learning from your peers and the communities in which they will be living. In other words: These 9 volunteers are not only a part of an exchange programme, they are the protagonist of a travel experience that happens once in their lifetime.

But the question is why a 20-year-old teenager wants to volunteer without being paid? There are



Participants of the Volunteer Centre in their internship before going to Canada

different answers to this. Unathi Bomela, one of the participants who are in Canada, pointed out that his dream is to become a fashion designer. "I am a guy who comes from a bad background, who did things that I do not feel proud of, when I was younger. I never thought of the future, only to live day by day, without any goals. I thought my life was about survival of the fittest, fighting making trouble and eventually death. But suddenly I changed. I started to go the church and do voluntary work and started to worry about my future", said the volunteer. Also Unathi asserts that he wants to become a fashion designer and he is creating his own network through the volunteer interaction. Being a volunteer has reaffirmed his dreams of working for the community.

Nirvana, another volunteer of the Canadian program, commented that she was a shy and a quiet teenager, sitting on the sofa and watching tv without working. Being involving in these activities makes her feel stronger, more confident in her abilities. It gives her tangible goals to pursue.

Travelling and helping the community to become better are the reasons for which Kanyisa Sipatise Nangu, another participant, applied for the Canada Exchange programme. Developing his personal skills, as communication and becoming self-confident are the benefits he gains from volunteering.

Their families are very proud and yet scared. None of them has been abroad before more so being away from their relatives for so long. But their parents know that going away, facing new challenges without the support of *mummy and daddy* is a positive particular passage to adulthood.

Helen Jonsen feels that the majority of the South African people are self-centred. "They do not have a broad sense of life. She, as a veteran traveller and as a mother, wants her daughter to have the opportunity to discover the world by herself. "When you go out and discover other cultures you can open your mind and realise how others lives, sometimes with both the good and the bad. It makes you appreciate what you have and realise that your problems are not as serious as you thought. Staying here, they do not know what is going on in other parts of the world",

Skills that the volunteers from Athlone team are going to learn working with Canada Youth, showed by Tammy Hoblak, the Canadian Program Manager.

1. How to function as a group
2. How to become involved in community development
3. Ways of resolving conflict
4. How to get along with others that you might not have chosen to be in your life
5. How to be away from home and to survive emotionally
6. Learn a new language
7. Learn new customs/culture
8. New learning in the area of: gender, environment, health, local political structures, anti-oppression, culture

Also Noluthando Zweni, the aunt of the exchange participant, Gcobani Zweni, asserts that she wants her nephew to study drama and being in Canada he can access opportunities to further develop his interest in arts and improve his cv. Nangu also says that as business student he is going to try to develop contacts and pick up ideas from abroad and if he likes the experience come back to study a MBA. That is the most important thing about the program: To show them ways to achieve further opportunities. Thus using the opportunities in the program as a stepping-stone for their future. "This project gives hope to young who are hopeless", shows Noluthando Zweni.

Also the majority of the exchange students agree that the main challenges abroad are the language and living with their host families, because of the cultural differences, with different traditions and customs. They are uncertain of how they are likely to adapt to the cultural differences. For example, Bomela said that in his community, Hout Bay, he is used to speak only Xhosa. It will be his first time speaking only English for so long. In that sense, his supervisor analyse that every travel experience is good for every young person. They are going to identify how things are different from their own country and develop their own thinking.

This experience will leave a mark both before and after this exchange program. "You cannot quantify that. It can be little changes, or big changes. Some of them are going to realise them in the moment, and others are going to digest them in a long term. I think that they are going to experience a mature transformation upon completion of this exchange program", specify their supervisor, Stemmet.

Also Tammy Hoblak, The Program Manage of Canada World Youth, says: " Volunteer Centre, has a great capacity to recruit and inspire the spirit of volunteerism. Volunteer Centre is a long term standing non-profit organization that has a sound structure and leadership. The organization was the headquarters for when we set up our Southern African partnerships with Namibia, Mozambique and Botswana and developed our environmental program. The goal of our programs is to ensure that youth see the value of volunteering and we hope they will embrace this in their lives now and in the future". That is the spirit of being volunteer: Your dreams can be real, make them happen.

For more information about International Youth Exchange Programmes – please contact the Volunteer Centre at 021 674 5338.