

Joseph Curran (Natural Sciences) – Lourdes, Easter 2018

Have you seen my Boogaloo?

I hadn't either, until Easter week of 2012. It was then that I travelled as a volunteer helper for the first time with HCPT - the Hosanna house and Children's Pilgrimage Trust. It was a week that profoundly changed my life, and I well and truly caught the HCPT bug. I have been back four times, most recently this Easter vacation.

HCPT is a charity that works to give disabled and disadvantaged children across the world the opportunity of a week's holiday in Lourdes, filled with fun and joy and love, whilst giving their parents and carers a week of respite. It can be life changing for the children, but also for the helpers – all of whom are volunteers. Helpers are responsible for the physical and emotional wellbeing of their assigned child throughout the week, which means everything from personal care to the 100th game of "I spy...". This is a huge responsibility, and whilst you become more experienced over years of travelling, each child is different, ensuring that I never fail to learn huge amounts during the week; about them, and about myself.

Travelling as part of the Cambridge group (Group 104), I was responsible this year for a fantastic young man, who seemed to never run out of energy. He had a wonderful week, really coming out of his shell after the first few days. Through interacting with him, and the other 7 children in our group I learnt a lot about what it means to communicate. I was struck by how much can be communicated non-verbally, and how these conversations and actions mean so much for a child who might otherwise be ignored and feel excluded.

Exclusion is the opposite of HCPT. For one week, Lourdes is a place where everyone is welcome, everyone is valued and everyone is loved in abundance. It is impossible to describe the week we spend together. Every year we try to brief new helpers about what they are likely to encounter, but it is just not possible. There is a tangible feeling that engulfs Lourdes that week that has to be experienced to be understood. And once they experience it, the new helpers join the thousands of others who are hooked and will never stop going back.

It is hard to explain why, however – the week is exhausting, emotional and extremely stressful. Moreover, from the outside it appears like total chaos – groups wander around this calm and reverent town emblazoned in bright colours (Group 104 have strayed from Cambridge blue to Cambridge neon orange), singing songs at the top of their lungs as they walk. They sit in cafés with guitars, Priests say Mass in animal onesies, helpers are dragged up to entertain crowds with silly dance moves, and French Hotel chefs look on in despair as their masterpieces are left untouched in favour of baguette and chips. Yet nobody minds, because the children's smiles make every embarrassing dance move, every chip donated and every sleepless night more than worth it.

And that's how I found my Boogaloo – it's a dance move in the first verse of a very long, but much loved song we sing all week long. I found my Boogaloo and I'll never look back. Will you find yours?

<https://www.hcpt.org.uk/>

<https://www.facebook.com/HCPT104/>

I am very grateful to Pembroke College for their financial support of my trip. Helpers pay their full fare so that all money raised but the group is used to fund children's places, who enjoy the whole week for free. It is a considerable cost, and I am grateful for the support that enabled me to travel to Lourdes this year, and partake in this fantastic experience, which continues to shape me as a person.