

Ciara McCarthy (Natural Sciences) - Tanzania, Summer 2015

After 48 hours of travelling, we bumped up a red dirt track towards Mvumi village in rural Tanzania, unsure what to expect. However, our month there surpassed my expectations in so many ways.

To start with, the village was a lot bigger and more bustling than I'd imagined with many shops, dressmakers, a market, several primary schools, even a hospital. The shops were often open late into the evening and music and shouting could be heard long after it got dark. We were to spend the month volunteering at the Secondary School: a large school with ... pupils and several boarding houses for both boys and girls. Secondary School in Tanzania isn't free, which has resulted in a varied student population: many of the students come from wealthy families from Dar es Salaam who are able to pay the fees, whereas others are from much poorer local families who are sponsored by DCT Mvumi Trust (the charity connected to the school) to give them the opportunity to study there. One of the projects we were involved with while we were there was helping to compile a collection of case studies about sponsored students. One of these students told us how she had been forced to leave home by her father's wives because they resented her so much for her education, and another how his mother and him had to live off an annual household income of just £4.50.

We mostly worked with the Form 1s, helping to improve their English. In Tanzania, students are taught in Swahili or their local language while at Primary School, yet when they reach Secondary School they are taught, and have to take their exams in, English. Many students come to Mvumi with very little English so it is vital that they improve as quickly as possible, as it has such a huge impact on the rest of their studies.

We ran an afterschool English Club, in which we helped them to write and perform their own plays. All the students got involved and came up with very imaginative plot lines, such as a girl falling in love with an elephant!

We also helped out at the school Debating Club. This was attended by almost the entire school, and tended to involve lots and lots of students going up to give their opinion on the topic, often with repetition of points, so could go on for hours! We felt slightly uncomfortable in the first one, as we realised we were the only two British girls in a hall full of Tanzanians in a debate about colonialism....The topics were often well chosen and the debates were always very lively, if a little disorganised. It was interesting to hear their opinions on the topics as they were often so different from those held in the West.

The school also had a large number of visually impaired students. They had to attend classes along with the sighted students but were unable to take notes, as their braille typewriters too loud and distracting for the other students. This meant they often just had to sit at the front of the class unable to participate. There was a visually impaired unit within the school with a small number of very committed staff, and we spent quite a lot of time there: tutoring the students, creating tactile teaching aids and painting a mural in the classroom with the tagline "Disability is not inability". We used paint and sand to write in braille so that the V.I. students would be able to read it.

We were made extremely welcome at both the school and around the village. We were invited to one of the village churches by a local vicar, and were treated to a delicious breakfast of mandazi, chai and chapatis at his house beforehand. We visited one of the teacher's houses and were shown around the garden, and given fruit and sugar cane to take with us. We were even invited to a wedding!

At the weekends we were able to explore other parts of Tanzania, spending a weekend in the capital, another going on safari and at the end spending a few days on Zanzibar, when we were able to use the limited Swahili we had acquired over the last month to barter for souvenirs. However, the highlight of our trip for me was definitely the time we spent at Mvumi. From the atmosphere at the student-staff football match when the students carried away their prize (a goat) to sitting in the local “pub” (a wooden fenced area partially covered by tarpaulin) looking up at the Milky Way, our experiences there were always remarkable if sometimes a little bizarre. It was a very humbling experience to be accepted so openly into such a wonderful community for even a short time, and I aim to continue to help Mvumi School Trust through further fundraising and hopefully even future visits.