

Worlds Without Borders

SHELLEY BOETTCHER

From building latrines and schools to teaching English or saving sea turtles—socially-sensitive Canadian youths can become involved with any number of projects worldwide that put them at the forefront of saving the world, travelling on a budget and learning a new language. And most people would agree that all are valid reasons why young adults choose to go to foreign countries to volunteer.

But are these projects successful? That is, do they provide the communities with something they are unlikely to achieve on their own? Well, the answer appears to be yes—and no.

Many volunteers find that they aren't needed—villagers in the developing countries are self-sufficient, familiar with their own country (and language, which most volunteers are not), and know precisely what they need. "These people go to developing countries with a pretty romanticized view about the impact that they're going to have," says Dr. Greg Fouts, an adolescent psychology professor at the University of Calgary for the past 24 years. "Then they get down there and realize that one person isn't going to make a huge change."

And the return to our wealthy, technologically-oriented society from a family-centred life of poverty is often difficult for idealistic young adults. "You start wondering about all that we have here," says Fouts, whose son, Ben, spent two years teaching public health in Guatemala with the U.S. Peace Corp. "A lot of these volunteers end up really soul searching. They have to question their values."

It certainly takes time to feel that something beyond a cultural exchange has been accomplished, and in a short-term program (one that lasts about six to 10 weeks), those goals may not be met. Fouts says his son didn't start to feel useful for several months. "Can you imagine, a guy, a 25-year-old guy, teaching women how to cook? And these are women who don't believe that men can even cook," he laughs. "It took him a good year to even be accepted, but the second year was very successful."

Still, the cultural exchange that occurs between the two groups—the volunteers and the residents of the developing country—often makes it more than worthwhile for all involved. "Volunteers serve an important function, by exposing developing countries to people from other countries," says Fouts. "The world has become a global economy."

Most volunteers choose a church-related or non-governmental organization (NGO), such as Youth Challenge International, CUSO or Canada World Youth, known for their well-organized and successful projects. And with around 300 registered NGOs in Canada, there are plenty of short-term and long-term projects to choose from.

MATTHEW MCLEAN

Matthew McLean hadn't travelled much before volunteering with Youth Challenge International in early 1998. "I was driving to hockey practice one night and heard about it on the radio," says the soft-spoken 23-year-old. With full support from his parents, he ended up on a crew of 13 volunteers in Guyana, first working on construction projects and then organizing a three-day youth skills summit which enabled Guyanese students from across the country to meet for the first time.

His 10-week placement was split between Anna Regina, a small town where the summit was held, and Bethany, a village of about 300 people. Living conditions were tough—despite the extreme heat, the volunteers laboured intensely to build an outhouse and a community kitchen. All lived together in the same tiny room, and hauled water from a creek for bathing, dishes and laundry. "That took some getting used to," McLean laughs.

Yet he still stays in touch with his fellow volunteers. And since Youth Challenge International's creation in 1989, there have certainly been many volunteers; more than 1,600 youth between the ages of 18 and 25 have participated in its projects. Teams of about a dozen young people, primarily from Canada and Australia, work on community, health and environmental projects around the world, including the Solomon Islands, Costa Rica and even in northern Canada.

Participants must raise over \$3,500 in their communities to cover the cost of each trip. McLean was fortunate; the minor hockey team that he coaches contributed the funds that he needed. He knows he was lucky to spend time in another country so cheaply, but he hasn't decided if he'll volunteer with another NGO again.

"I'm not sure about any deep or meaningful impact that we had... The general feeling from the group was that they didn't really need us. There had been several other volunteer groups over the last five years in the same village," he says. "And what we did in seven weeks, the local people probably could have done much quicker... But the youth skills summit was very important."



KARLA MUNDY

Karla Mundy built latrines and taught dental hygiene on a community health project last summer in southern Mexico. It was Mundy's third trip to Mexico but her first trip as a volunteer on a seven-week program with Amigos de las Americas, an American-based organization.

Like most of the young adults that take part in these programs, Mundy had mixed reasons for going—partly to improve the lives of people in poorer countries and partly to experience another way of life. "I took a year off from school and I knew I wanted to travel, but I wanted to do something where I was working," she explains. "I wanted to improve my Spanish and live in the culture, too."

Mexico was a compromise between Mundy and her parents. Mundy wanted to go further south, perhaps to Brazil—a country that has always fascinated her. But her parents, worried about the 18-year-old travelling alone for the first time, thought Mexico was a closer, safer option.

The fact that they were right was perhaps part of the reason why Mundy's trip wasn't as fulfilling as she had hoped. "The first town was really self-sufficient. We didn't feel needed as much. They needed our supplies, but they didn't need us," she explains. "Mexico is pretty advanced in its healthcare systems."



Initially stationed in Nehapa, a town of about 2,000 people, she later moved to Trebol, a village of about 70 people when her first partner from the program suffered so much culture shock that she decided to go home early. (One of Amigos de las Americas' policies is that no volunteer ever works in a town alone.)

But Trebol was much smaller and poorer, a different world from the Mexican resort towns like Puerto Vallarta and Cancún that most North Americans experience. By the time Mundy finished the program, she was lonely, sick with parasites and under stress from the crowded living conditions—in other words, glad to come home.

"They (the program coordinators) said we were supposed to have our honeymoon stage and we just kept waiting for it to come," she laughs, telling stories of several volunteers who quit because they didn't feel needed or because of bureaucratic problems in the organization.

Still, she has held on to her strong interest in other cultures. Now a 19-year-old student at Bishop's University, east of Montreal, she studies classical piano and business. In her spare time, she sings and plays keyboards in a soul band and takes dance classes—African, jazz, funk, gypsy. The vivacious teen isn't studying development issues or Spanish, yet she still believes that social programs in developing countries are necessary. "There's definitely culture shock when you're there, but there's culture shock when you return to Canada, too," she explains. "I would go back, but with a different program—something with more training, where I was more needed."

CAROLYN BUCKEE

Carolyn Buckee describes her nomadic family as the biggest reason that she decided to volunteer building aqueducts in Costa Rica with Youth Challenge International last year. Off to Nepal for a similar project with Humanitarian Education Long-term Projects (HELP), the 19-year-old Calgarian has lived and travelled throughout the world—Norway, Qatar, Alaska, Peru, Italy, Oman and Australia—and is now a biology student in Edinburgh, Scotland.

From an adventurous family of four girls, she's not the only one to trek off to less-than-typical parts of the world. One of her sisters also plans to join Youth Challenge International, while another trekked in Argentina. And as children, their parents both lived in India.

Travelling has become a way of life for Buckee—but it's not a cheap way to live. After graduating from Strathcona-Tweedsmuir high school in 1996, she worked for a year and fund-raised in the community to raise just under \$4,000 for the 10-week volunteer program in Costa Rica.

She worked alongside a team of 13 other volunteers in intense heat and humidity to pack supplies, mix cement and build the aqueducts' cinderblock walls. They'd stop after lunch because the afternoon rains would create a sea of mud.

Buckee admits that the villagers could have easily done the projects, but she's adamant that the experience was worth the effort. "It's more of a cultural exchange. It's being accepted into a very small traditional society," she elaborates. "We were there to help out and experience their culture. We learned from them and they learned from us. They were so generous. It has really broadened my horizons."

New friends, languages and experiences. Vital cultural exchanges in a world that sometimes still seems too big and impersonal. These are all common bonds amongst people who have undertaken similar trips. Indeed, Buckee is already contemplating a working vacation to Greece next summer. "I don't mind being a penniless student. It's not a priority," she says. "Personal fulfillment, travel and volunteering—those are priorities."



JANE MacKIMMIE

Jane MacKimmie's experience is a little different than most. After travelling for six months with her boyfriend throughout South America, MacKimmie became so enamoured with the countries she was visiting that she decided to stay and work in La Paz, Bolivia. After a long job search, she had almost given up until she accidentally met up with a local schoolteacher at an annual summer solstice celebration. Through him, she ended up volunteer teaching in one of the public schools, as well as helping young streetchildren with crafts and homework.

It was not easy. Her boyfriend chose to return to Canada after about a month, and living conditions were austere. Once a week, MacKimmie would go to a fellow teacher's place for a shower. Yet, as MacKimmie recounts her stories, it is easy to see that the six months she spent in La Paz were worth all hardships. "I would do it again in a heartbeat," she says, without hesitation. "It was the greatest experience in my life."

"You could really pick up the contentment and peace of mind and joy that was in her voice," says Mary MacKimmie, recounting her daughter's telephone calls home. "Her heart was really captured by the people down there."

Mary MacKimmie admits she was apprehensive when her daughter, then 22 years old, left to travel for a year, but she decided to spend 10 days in Bolivia at the end of her daughter's trip, partly to see what had drawn her to stay in the country for so long.

It wasn't, however, quite what she expected. "When I saw where Jane had lived, the whole bottom fell out of the bag. It was very rudimentary," she said. "At first I questioned if she had lost sight of her family and her background because she had really embraced these people's lifestyle...I've travelled a lot but always within my comfort zone and this was definitely outside my comfort zone."

Yet the culture shock that Jane MacKimmie felt upon leaving Canada was minimal compared to the shock that she experienced when she came home. Upon returning to Calgary, after the initial stories, she didn't want to talk about her trip for the first few weeks as she assimilated back into North American culture. "I was like a deer caught in the headlights when I came back. I had no small talk," she says. "Everyone would be complaining about their jobs or whatever, and I just didn't care. I knew in two weeks, I'd be the same way, but it was tough at first. I was so overwhelmed."

It took about a year for Jane's mother to understand some of the changes that her daughter, now 24, had undergone. "I'm not trying to make her sound any more special than anyone else that does something similar but she really made a difference for those children...Basically it was a friendship. She was lucky to have a friendship with common interests and memories and joy."

As for Jane MacKimmie, she's still thinking about all that she experienced in Bolivia. She's stayed in touch with many of the people that she met, and wants to return one day to Bolivia. In the meantime, she's considering a master's degree in geography or development studies.

"I don't have much interest in building a church or a school or anything—I think they can build that stuff themselves," says MacKimmie. "I think it's really important but there are tons of unemployed people down there who can do things like that."

"There's not that much that I can give and there's not that much that they need. They're not waiting for handouts by any stretch of the imagination. They need some things for sure, but it's structural changes within their society—not someone giving them pencil crayons."

Shelley Boettcher writes regularly for the Calgary Herald and Avenue magazine.

