

Note from *people and places*: this volunteer's placement was designed specifically for them – they went through our full matching process, as we've been doing with you. The placement report indicates their particular skills and experience – yours may be similar or completely different – your own placement will make best use of **your** experience and skills. Every volunteer is different – in what they give and what they gain. Reports from previous volunteers serve to give you as good a picture as possible about the project. If you have any questions about any of the detail in this report please do not hesitate to contact me at dianne@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

Volunteer placement report – Mary's Little Lambs, Kololi, The Gambia

Volunteer: Heidi Dahlstrom

4 week Placement, October 2022

What was your motivation for volunteering?

This is very difficult to date but I have wanted to return to Africa for about 25 years or more. I visited Kenya in 1995 and shortly after I had my children, at some point I said to myself that when my children were all grown up, I would go back to Africa and volunteer with children. This year after the pandemic and some personal issues it seemed like the absolute perfect time to fulfil my dream.

Pre departure preparation - were you happy with the information we shared with you during your preparation for this placement? what information did you consider most useful?

I scoured the internet for the right kind of volunteer trip – the last thing I wanted at the age of 49 was to end up on a gap year with a load of Uni students, if I was going to do this, I wanted to do it right. I couldn't find anything suitable so I asked my travel agent if she knew of anything and she told me about People and Places, one google click later I realised that this was the kind of company I wanted to work with. I was concerned that I didn't have the relevant skills as I'm not a trained teacher but I work for a charity that supports families with young children and so I hoped that would be good enough. I was lucky to meet Dianne (**people and places' Placement Director**) in person as we both live in Dorset, we had a lovely chat over coffee and Dianne told me all about Mary's Little Lambs and The Gambia and reassured me that my skill set would be useful there. (**Note from people and places: all volunteer placements are created to match a volunteer's skills to local needs – teaching skills were not what was required for this placement**)

It was really helpful to be put in touch with another volunteer, Joanne, who had been out to The Gambia a few times before. Between Dianne and Joanne, I think I had enough information about The Gambia, what the culture was like and what to expect. It's good to know about the local 'bumsters' as it gave me a chance to always have a quick answer at hand to ward off any unwanted attention 'I'm good thanks but I'm just off to meet someone' or 'I'm just going to work', however, please don't worry, I found everyone I met to be extremely friendly and most Gambians you meet just want to say 'hello, how are you' with no ulterior motive. They don't call it 'the smiling coast' for no reason. It was also good to know that it is a predominately Muslim country, I was always mindful and respectful of this whilst there.

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I was given an outline of what they felt I could help with whilst on my placement by Lisong and Michelle, they asked if I could deliver;

1. Training on Child Protection in school and in the homes
2. How to manage children with autism
3. How to support families who are struggling to cope with their children for other reasons

I had Zoom calls with Michelle, the school's supervisor and with Lisong (owner of MLL) and her husband Adama (ITTOG & local partner to P&P's). One of my main concerns was how to deliver safeguarding training that was culturally sensitive whilst still getting across the knowledge and importance of safeguarding and protecting children. I was also concerned that whilst I have good awareness of autism, I am not an expert but I have completed some training and worked with parents and children with autism and other needs, I was reassured by everyone but I was still a little worried.

How was your accommodation?

I arrived at Banjul airport just after midnight and was met by Adama and Fatou, a lady that is working with Adama and is part of the 'No woman left behind' campaign. It was lovely to see friendly faces at the end of a long and tiring trip (no direct flights in early October) and they drove me straight to the Riyan apartments and helped me get booked in. The apartment was lovely, spacious and clean with pretty much everything you needed.



If I go again, I won't clog up my suitcase with a hairdryer (there was one like you get at gym's / swimming pools in the bathroom) but also because it was so hot, I spent almost the entire month with my hair up. No need to over pack either – there was a washing machine and airer! And a smart TV, I did Netflix binge a little. There's a wonderful swimming pool area surrounded by lovely plants – don't get spooked like I did when the gardener watered the garden at midnight though 😊

The staff were very friendly, I had my place cleaned once a week which was plenty for me but they'd clean it every day if you wanted. There are ceiling fans and if you needed, air conditioning (for an extra cost) in the

bedroom, I braved it with just the fans as I hoped I would acclimatise better that way – not that it worked though, I'm sure I was as hot at the end of my time there as I was at the beginning!

Orientation and preparation at the start of the placement

Adama and Fatou arranged to visit me on the Sunday afternoon, they drove me around the local area and showed me where all the important places were; the supermarkets (and which might be cheaper), the cash points, the beach and Senegambia Strip and the traffic light (I'll let them explain that one to you 😊) along



with pointing out restaurants and explaining about the taxi's. When they dropped me off, I ventured to one of the supermarkets and bought supplies, it was weird dealing in cash after we've been pretty much cashless in the UK since the pandemic.



Adama arrived the next morning to take me up to Mary's Little Lambs for the first time.

Everyone was busy preparing for the first proper day at school on the Tuesday. After being shown around and introduced to all the teachers and after spending an hour or so in the nursery, I was sent home to rest – work would start the following day. A teacher, auntie Elsie walked me back to the apartment, it's only a 10 minute walk on an uneven sandy track. Adama came later that afternoon to take me out to get an African sim card for my phone.

Your experience and work – including what resources you may have left behind and with whom / Successes, disappointments and challenges of your placement

Week 1

The following morning I felt confident with finding my own way up to the school. I spent the morning in the nursery with the little lambs, lambs and big lambs. (Note from p+p - these are the names given to the classes in the nursery school). The

boy they believe to have autism wasn't in school so I just observed and helped out with the other children. There was one little girl that I wondered if she was on the spectrum due to her behaviour but later in my placement I realised that a lot of her frustration was mis-communication, she only spoke Fula and the other children either spoke Wolof and/ or Mandinka and unlike the other children, she didn't know any English. I actually saw a massive improvement in her behaviour during my time there, I'm not sure how much was down to her getting used to the environment (as she was a little lamb and new to the school) and how much was down to the attention I gave her. One day later in my placement, I spent some time with her drawing, using a small chalk board and chalk, we drew a person together, she added hands and feet and I realised how much a lack of resources affects the children, if they could afford more staff, so that all the children had some one-to-one time, I think they would see a big difference in some of the children. This little girl blossomed with some extra support. One of her other problems was playing with the other children as she couldn't tell them what she wanted, it became a thing every day during outside play, that she would take me by the hand and lead me over to the swings and I would help them all get a turn. One day there were so many that wanted a go, we all counted to 30 during each child's go before swapping, so they were practising their counting and being lovely at taking turns, it worked very well but again, they need some guided support.

There were 2 bank holidays in my first week and on one of the days I ventured down to the local shopping centre, a modern building with air conditioning and fast food places, I sat with a coffee and read whilst eating this lovely pancake →

I spent the rest of the week observing in some of the Prep classrooms and on the Friday after school, which finished at midday, I facilitated my first training session with the staff on Autism Awareness. Although without electricity that day, some couldn't see the PowerPoint on my small laptop screen. Without the ability to diagnose any children with children with autism / ADHD / or other learning needs in The Gambia, it is not always easy to tell but hopefully, having



a general awareness will not only help them cope with an autistic child better but also any other children who may have a learning delay of some description. We had a good discussion about some of the children they have or have had at the school. (Note from people and places: frequent power cuts are a fact of life in The Gambia – everyone is very resourceful about finding ways to continue work without power)

Week 2

My second week at MLL, I spent some more time observing the older children, they have a child in Prep 3 and a child in prep 5 who sometimes struggle to keep up with the class and understand some of the lessons. Halfway through the week a little boy walked into prep 5 looking up at the ceiling fans and I knew it was the boy with ASD, so I spent the rest of the morning with him. I let him lead our time, I copied his drawing on a chalk board by watching and then making the same marks in an exercise book, he thought this was quite funny. We then went and played in the sand, I allowed him space but he kept looking round to check on me, he'd briefly look, give me a massive smile and then carry on playing. He definitely has autistic traits but he's fairly high functioning and he will give eye contact and interacts quite well when he wants to. I think he will cope quite well in mainstream school although again, I have to confirm, I am no expert. I spent the rest of the week helping out in the nursery and offering one-to-one time with this little boy.



At the end of my second week on the Friday lunchtime again, we set up the overhead projector in one of the classrooms, so I could deliver my safeguarding training, thankfully we had electricity that day. We had a really good conversation and most of the teachers had come across some form of abuse, whether it be overdisciplining or neglect – there was some discussion about things like lunch boxes not getting emptied and children coming in with the same uneaten food for days (you can imagine in that heat, what this was like). Some of the teachers were aware of sexual abuse in their communities. All teachers said they felt confident about raising concerns and it's something that MLL seems to take very seriously, so I was really pleased about this.

Week 3

Lisong had arranged for me to visit 3 specialist schools a short drive away from MLL in Kanifing, Serrekunda. Adama gave me a lift to each school and introduced me to the head teachers. I got back to the apartment on my own each day by walking down the first road and then catching one of the local taxis, this was quite an experience but really helped build my confidence getting about and helped me get to know the area better.

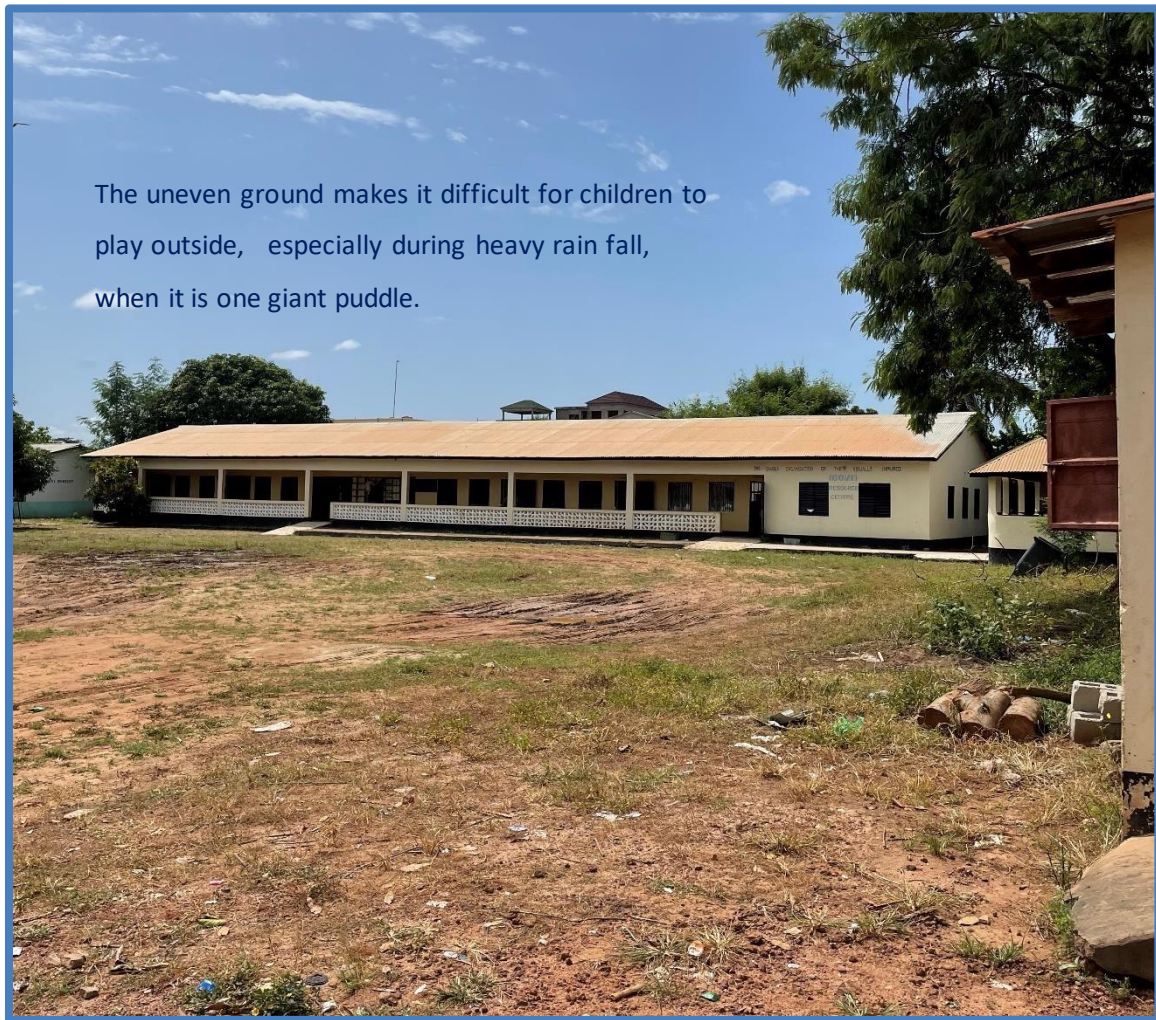
Monday - I went to St. John's School for the deaf, the school originally opened in the 1970's in Banjul and then moved to Kanifing in the 80's. They cover grade 1 (5 years) to grade 12 (18years). I was shown around the whole school by the deputy head and shown how to sign 'good morning' to the teachers and children. I then spent a little time with the youngest children. I learnt the alphabet in sign language and then I went and observed a classroom with older children. The curriculum was exactly the same as MLL prep classes and they seemed to have good resources. The older children learnt skills such as woodwork, metal work, sewing and IT. I was informed that when they leave they are able to go on and learn other practical skills such as hairdressing and carpentry, so that they will be able to find employment.



Tuesday – I went to the Methodist Special School, which opened in 1999. The children have a variety of different needs; from being wheelchair bound, having cerebral palsy and some were severely autistic to name a few, the school does well to try and cater for all. The age range goes from early years up to early adulthood with some students in their 20's. Access to the school is difficult, there are some school buses but for various reasons, that's not always possible, so they just don't go. More than 400 students are registered to go to this school but only around 150 go on a regular basis. That's a lot of children who aren't able to access education. The government pays the teacher's wages and is free for the children but they rely heavily on donations to provide a school meal and learning resources. The church will help out financially if they can though. There is a garden where they grow corn, ochre and other vegetables and they have mango trees and banana plants. The older children help out in the garden and they eat the produce they grow.

Wednesday – my last specialist school was a trip to The Gambia Organisation of the Visually Impaired, situated at the GOVI Resource Centre. This school was also originally situated in Banjul until the government gave GOVI the land and an NGO paid for the school to be built back in 2000. Again the school is free to the children and the teachers are paid by the government. The school buses are shared with the Methodist Special School, the morning I went, the traffic was so bad that most of the children didn't even get there until well after 10 a.m. which is disruptive to the school day. This transport is also difficult for children to access, especially if they live miles inland, as parents would have to pay for the children to get to the bus pick-up points. Some families send their children to live with family members that live more locally as it is the only school in The Gambia for visually impaired children.

They rely on donations for all resources and because of the cost of braille writing machines (that look like old style typewriters) there is definitely a lack of other resources in the school. It was heart-breaking to see the nursery children just sat in a bare room with no toys learning letters and letter sounds by rote. The children don't start learning braille until in prep 1 and learning to use the machines in prep 2. The age range is the same as MLL, nursery up to prep 6 and then the children are integrated into main stream school with extra support for exams etc.



The uneven ground makes it difficult for children to play outside, especially during heavy rain fall, when it is one giant puddle.

The rest of week 3 and for all of week 4, I helped out in the nursery as 3 of the teachers were out all day doing some teacher training with Joanne, the other volunteer from People and Places and with Lisong.

On my penultimate day, I talked through some resources I'd taken out with me to Auntie Christy (prep 3 & 4 teacher) and Uncle Francis. These were some laminated cards that might help the teachers to start discussions with groups of parents about discipline and helping the parents look at what is important in their children's lives. Regretfully, I think now that it would have made a good further training session with the teachers but hopefully they can still use the resources themselves.

On my last morning, I joined Joanne and Lisong at the ITTOG centre where they were having a lovely celebration after their 2 weeks of teacher training, it was a lovely, joyful way to finish my placement.

What was the highlight of your volunteer experience?



This was one of the highlights (but there were many more) of my time at MLL in The Gambia, seeing 2 of the children that I had been supporting playing so lovely together for about 15-20 minutes was just amazing, they seemed to be playing together but they each were doing their own thing, singing and talking in different languages but just so happy alongside each other, no arguments, no snatching, no attention seeking, it was absolutely beautiful to witness.

Would you recommend volunteering to other people or not? please tell us why

Yes, undoubtedly – to volunteer abroad gives you such a different perspective on your own life, it was the most humbling experience. I walked into my home and couldn't believe how much 'stuff' I own, it all seemed so materialistic and just too much but I am so much more grateful for everything and everyone in my life, it was a very worthwhile experience!

How did you spend your leisure time?

Apart from binge watching Netflix and having my daily swim in the Riyan Apartment's pool 😊 I visited the beautiful beach, the crocodile park and museum, the monkey park, Banjul and local shops and restaurants.

Here's a collection of photos from my time in The Gambia.

And Finally

I would like to say a huge heartfelt 'THANK YOU' (in no particular order) to Adama, Fatou, Michelle, Lisong, Joanne and all the other teachers from MLL and the other schools I visited along with all the Gambians I met, for all helping to make my time in The Gambia so memorable and wonderful, thank you!



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