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Human Biosciences

In the summer of 2014, 12 Coventry University students including myself went to Malawi to volunteer for 24 days. Having never travelled anywhere apart from Nepal and the UK, I was very excited to receive this opportunity to explore a new country. We stayed at Fisherman's Rest for most of our time there; lovely accommodation on top of a hill that overlooked the Great Rift Valley. We were involved in different community activities: revamping libraries and referencing all the books, fixing boreholes, raising health awareness, brick-making, teaching in three different schools, reading books to the children and serving porridge at the community centre. Despite the obvious language barrier, I personally found teaching very challenging as this was new for me. Every day was different; we were never sure of the turnout of students and always had to come prepared for large classes.

However, the children's enthusiasm and their eagerness to learn made a daunting task very gratifying.



Very quickly, I began to realise the sheer poverty and sacrifice these people made on a day-to-day basis. For example: despite the high risk of malaria, the local people still used their mosquito nets to either fish or protect their crops from birds, instead of protecting themselves. Moreover, the number of mosquito nets per household seemed inadequate to accommodate the growing number of family members. This shocked me because these simple measures of prevention were not implemented.

During our stay at Fisherman's Rest, we also had the privilege of learning Chichewa most mornings after breakfast. I enjoyed learning the language and it definitely proved to be very useful, as most locals did not speak English very well. It proved to be very handy when we visited local markets to buy *chitenji*, a traditional garment of Malawi. We also put our bargaining skills to the test as our team DASH split up into groups of three with an equal amount of kwacha currency to see which team could buy the most ingredients for dinner.

For the last four days of this trip, we were accommodated at Nanchengwa lodge. This was situated in the midst of a local village next to Lake Malawi. Therefore, we really got the chance to experience the local tradition and culture while we stayed there. For instance, upon our arrival at the lodge we had the chance to observe an initiation ceremony- the last part of a 30-day ritual. Furthermore, Dr Lund kindly arranged a local Nyau dance, which consisted of people in masks dancing and exhibiting different personas.



Two young initiates at the celebration party to end their initiation

Many things made this trip a memorable one- little things like travelling on a pickup truck, visiting a mosque and playing with children at the orphanage- to gaining a big personal achievement by climbing the 2nd highest mountain of Africa, Mt. Mulanje.

It was also a humble experience to take tours of Malawian homes and observe extreme living conditions. The highlights of my trip were when we came across a herd of beautiful African elephants on the safari, which left us all in awe to witness these majestic creatures in their natural habitat. A personal favourite moment was when I went snorkelling for the first time at Lake Malawi. I had never witnessed anything so beautiful and peaceful in my life.

This trip has truly changed my perspective of how I see the world now. I have learnt to make conscious decisions in my day-to-day life.