



ROKO 20 ACADEMY MAY 2019 NEWSLETTER

by Matt and Rebecca
Jude and Aila

A Volunteer's Report

This May Newsletter brings to you two separate reports written by volunteers about what it's like to volunteer at Roko 20 Academy.

- Matt and Rebecca who come from England arrived in March and stayed for 3 months
- Aila from Sweden and Jude from England spent 4 weeks and 3 months respectively

Matt and Rebecca

We arrived at the school and were greeted by over a hundred smiling faces, each one as individual and quirky as the next. The school itself is set on a hillside overlooking an enormous valley with mountains visible in the distance, as you walk through the gates you are met with a beautiful pink tree in the rocky hillside playground. On the right children swinging in the swings and on the left pupils sat in old tyres reading books or playing games with nothing but sticks and stones. As we walked down further into the school we were greeted by Job, the school's manager, with a firm handshake, whose house we had eaten at on our night of arrival instantly making us feel welcome and at ease within the gates of the school.

This was our introduction to the Roko family, our experience since



then has been one of plentiful smiles, challenges, and learning that neither of us will ever forget. I mention the challenges encountered along the way together with the smiles because there are

trials of will and integrity but it is how you react to these that determine the difference you make at Roko 20, and ultimately how fulfilling you will find time here. Challenges come in all forms including the ambiguous cultural boundaries/ differences, behaviours from teachers, and challenges thrown up by pupils to name a few!

Our biggest challenge as people whose child and adult lives have



revolved around sport was seeing the current provision for youth sport not only at Roko 20 but in the wider culture. We were surprised to see that the school field where the children play was essentially a dust bowl on a hill, this meant *foot-e-ball* (as they call it) resembled Gloucestershire's Coopers Hill Cheese Chase more than the beautiful game. The gradient ruined any sport you would want to play and during the dry season turned the red soil into a dustbowl.

Despite the poor conditions it didn't in any way prevent the children from enjoying their games lessons.

A couple of weeks in we were also lucky enough to witness Roko 20's attendance at their first ever athletics competition, the children showed amazing resilience on a very hot day with many children placing in the races and progressing to the next stage of the competition!

This was a wonderful achievement and experience but did not come without its tribulations.



Although Roko 20 did a fantastic job of providing for pupils including plenty of water and food throughout the day, multiple children from other schools passed out from heat exhaustion as they were pushed to run in multiple long distance events with no water (no wonder it was Kenyans that aced the London marathon this year!).

It is safe to say our first few weeks at the school were a real eye opener and we both learnt a lot about the Kenyan sporting culture and school life. We decided during this time that we were keen to try and impact sport where we could. This was a challenging task because a lot of the difficulties and problems arose from opinions of sport based within Kenyan culture. We decided to impact with direct action that challenges current teachers and provides the seeds for long term change and opportunity for sport within the school to continue growing. From speaking with teachers, we have found out that the main barriers to teaching PE were as follows:

- Dusty or very muddy clay field – ruining clothes and meaning they are dirty for the rest of the day
- Multiple groups of students doing PE at the same time (up to 3 grades at a time – 30+ students!)
- Lack of training/ understanding of games
- Unable to see the benefit of PE as a learning tool

By providing the means to level and lay grass on the playing field we hope to combat the reluctance of teachers to get involved as they will no longer have to worry about the dust when teaching sport. During the rainy season though it may still be muddy the grass should absorb the water and remove the cloggy clay texture of the dirt which gets everywhere.

We have spoken with teachers and Job arranging for the timetables to be organized so each grade has PE at a separate time, this puts the teachers in a position where they can perform what they would like to do with their class during this allocated time. It means that you no longer have grade 1 in PE playing with grade 5 students twice their size, so they can enjoy the sports played and have a fair chance.



Matt has spent his time here teaching new games to students and teachers in the hope they can take inspiration from this and continue to play these games moving

forward, this has already come into fruition with a few teachers championing handball with the students. It is hoped that the teachers will also see that PE can be used as a learning tool across multiple subjects by integrating aspects of spelling, language, mathematics, and other subjects to engage those children who learn kinesthetically throughout the lesson.

So far, we have raised over \$800 in contributions to go towards improving sport for these children.

Alongside the vast work we have put in during our time here teaching both children and teachers' new sports and activities which are inclusive for all, the donations have provided a large level playing field.



Though it is still dusty there are plans for grass to be planted during the holidays which will provide access to an appropriate area for the children.

All staff members will be first aid trained to ensure that sport can be safer not only for Roko 20 children but also for other pupils at events where Roko 20 attend. Our hopes are that other schools may see this and follow suit.



Our final contribution will be the completion of a basic adventure playground which will give a different option of physical exploration during break times to those children who don't like football (even if they must be mad!). This has been started with the help of the pupils who volunteered their time along with parents in the holidays.

I (Bex) spent most of my time with the younger kids - PP1 and PP2.

You may think this would be easy, but it wasn't without its challenges. Firstly, the children speak 3 languages; Kiswahili, Kikuyu and very basic English so trying to get to know them took some time. Once I had, I was totally in love with them all. The teaching methods are very different here (repeat after me x5) so where I could I would take a more laid-back approach to a lesson - maybe creative or a video class.



I was also able to introduce PP1 to their first ever computer lesson. As they have nothing like this at home, this went down very well, and they continue to use the computer room a few times a week.

We hope that our time here has been as valuable to the school as it has to ourselves. We look forward to completing our placement and our projects here and continuing to support the development of Roko 20 in the future, it truly is a magical place where children love to be.



Matt and Rebecca

A mature age perspective on a genuine volunteering experience in a Kenyan school



At 57 and 40, many of Aila's and Jude's friends thought they were mad, Aila (pronounced like Isla) for deciding to use 4 weeks of her annual leave as well as an unpaid week and the comfort of her home in Helsinki to spend time volunteering in a Kenyan school and Jude for taking a sabbatical from her

paid employment in Somerset, England, for 3 ½ months (supported by IVS). However we'd beg to differ and I imagine there are many other like-minded souls who would agree it was time well spent.

Living in Murang'a

Accommodation in Murang'a is basic, but all the facilities are there.

Fresh produce is freely available, picked that morning and available at the market daily from local growers/ sellers, from tomatoes, onions, avocados, potatoes, carrots, green peppers, mango's, bananas and courgette's amongst large tubs of all types of beans and legumes, and freshly fried meat and vegie samosa's, chapati's and masala chips with tomato salsa!!!

The school food gets a bit monotonous, as the menu is repeated each week but for this vegetarian it was perfectly edible and certainly filling. The Kenyan diet is carb rich. For those who love a good brew, prepare yourself now, Kenyan tea is not unlike chai. It is milky, weak and sweet and that's without adding sugar. We were not a fan and I could not acquire the taste; however, Aila, like many previous volunteers, adapted and mixed her Nescafe to make Coftee? A blend of both cultures!!

Drinking water is available in large 10L refillable containers for next to nothing (150ksh).

Lastly, what all of us cannot do without these days, technology!!! It is easy to access a Kenyan SIM and internet coverage in Murang'a is sufficient.

There are also opportunities for further exploring nearby, a day trip to Nairobi, a weekend in Ol Pejeta Conservancy where you can see some of the big five or simply a day sat by the larger pool surrounded by trees and lovely river at Nokras sister hotel Riverine which is only 9kms north of Murang'a.

So what does volunteering really look like... let's get down to business...

We sorted donated shoes and clothing, we observed classes, we played with the little ones (I could have eaten them on a plate they were so delicious) and supported the older ones and their teachers. We carried on where previous volunteers left off, particularly in computer classes, reading story books to the whole class group, assisting with art and in addition to P.E. For those who are teacher or TEFL trained there is opportunity to support and assist the school teachers in relevant classes like English.

We also had the privilege of going on home visits to meet parents in order to provide updates to existing sponsors about the children and families. Needless to say both Aila and I came away after our experience with a desire to sponsor children whose families and homes we saw first-hand. Amongst the heart-breaking poverty, there is unquestionable faith and amazing hospitality.

For those volunteers physically capable of an undulating 40 minute walk, the school is within walking distance from Murang'a, where you will stay. It is also an amazing way to start the day, as the sun rises over the hills and crops along the way. However I would recommend walking a couple of times with someone who knows the way. As Aila would testify getting lost one morning after going up and down dale in quite the wrong direction. School starts at 7:20am, with morning assemblies on Monday and Friday's at 8am. Be prepared to speak, like the other teachers, to the entire school group at times.

The school van drops the children in two rounds with the first trip leaving Murang'a at 6:25am. Like in many developing countries, things can be and happen slowly in Kenya.

Waiting for the school bus at the end of the day can provide an opportunity to participate in the Literacy programme reading one-on-one with children who need to catch up, or just 'enjoy' the children, playing simple games (skipping, hand clapping rhymes, throwing Frisbee, kicking the football) with them.

At the end of the day you'll feel shattered and want nothing more than a shower and to go to bed at 8pm. It's all perfectly normal I can assure you!!!

As one of only a handful of western, Caucasian foreigners in this town we were certainly noticed and known but Murang'a felt perfectly safe for us.

Roko 20 is a genuine school community where children want to come every day. They are the first ones here and they are often reluctant to leave. This is a grass roots organisation that literally started with one classroom and grew. If we were to measure in time the cost of all the hours the staff work, the school runs at a loss and the effort and time that everyone works is immeasurable. The donations certainly do not cover all the administration and running costs. This is not a big corporation with TV commercials. If you choose to volunteer you liaise directly with Tracey who started Roko 20 in 2014. It is the personal touches and effort that Roko 20, and to be fair all Kenyan's will go to, that made all the difference in these volunteers' experience.

Volunteers are respected and valued at Roko 20. Ideas welcomed. Support with fundraising appreciated. Your contribution is important, and it is hoped that Roko 20 would be visited by volunteers throughout the year, whereby the next volunteer picks up where the last left. It is vital you come with the right (and a realistic) attitude. First establishing relationships and recognising the pace of Kenyan change. We are not here to save the world.

All that being said, I would not trade the difficult parts, as it all has provided an undoubtedly, enriching learning opportunity. Roko 20, the staff and of course children will leave a long-lasting imprint on your heart and soul. Questioning many things about yourself, your values and society as a whole and seriously contemplating when you could make the trip to Roko 20 again.

Jude and Aila