

Arva Arva

Trip to Africa a life-changer

Arva teen travels as a youth volunteer to Kenya, the land of flat & dry

by Dawn Lyons

ARVA – She played with the children. She carried 20-litre jugs of water on her back. She helped to build a library. And the experience changed her life.

Caora McKenna, a 16-year-old student at Medway Secondary School travelled from 22 July to 10 August to Olookerin, a rural area of Kenya as part of one of the Me to We organization's youth volunteer trips. The Banner previously reported about McKenna's fundraising efforts to fund the cost of her trip as well as her inspiration for becoming involved with Me to We.

After flying from Montreal to Zurich and then to Nairobi, a utility vehicle transported the volunteers to Olookerin. What was McKenna's first impression of Kenya?

"It looked like the prairies," she said. "It was flat and dry."

McKenna added that the roads were what we would consider to be ditches, which made the

ride very bumpy. The accommodations in Olookerin consisted of army tents and cots, with a mess hall for meals. Light was only available at night from 6:00pm until 9:00pm, thanks to use of a generator, and a tented hole in the ground with a plastic seat served as the toilet.

"We were lucky we had a plastic seat. There were other areas that just had the hole and that was it," McKenna described.

The Olookerin community held a welcoming ceremony involving traditional song and dance performed by the local children. The headmaster of the school also spoke.

"It was cool to hear the headmaster say how happy he was to have us, that our being there really would make a difference."

The volunteers mixed cement by hand and broke stone bricks to the required size to lay the bricks to build the library. Water had to be retrieved from a supply hole,

which would be depleted of its water supply within months, creating a need for the locals to find a new source of water. With the library's overall structure completed by the volunteers, roofing was to be completed by a professional company prior to the building being used by the community.

"I would love to go back and just visit and see how what we have done has grown," said McKenna, "but I also want to go somewhere else and help there."

McKenna enjoyed interacting with the children, who learn English as part of their school curriculum. This allows for ease of conversation with some of the older children who were eager to hear about life in Canada and often identified with the volunteers by discussing favourite sports. McKenna speaks passionately about the appreciation the children had for the work the volunteers were doing as well as simple gifts that they brought to leave with the children.

"Something we consider a simple, little thing had such an impact," she explained. "Like they were so happy and thankful to get a soccer ball – I might have four of those just sitting in my garage, but it was something so special for them. It makes you more appreciative for what you have at home."


Because of her experience, McKenna is now living more simply herself. She doesn't buy bottled water and is more conscious about her shopping habits. She selects retailers who support charities and/or fair trade items, and also will frequent thrift shops instead of buying new.

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