

Meet the volunteer - Bernadette



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Bernadette's experiences in Kenya inspired her to volunteer with CAFOD. After returning to the UK she gave an amazing 25 years as a teacher - supporting CAFOD all the while! When she retired she didn't stop there, joining our fantastic team of school volunteers.

What first attracted you to CAFOD?

When I was in my 20s I worked in a small village on the Kenya-Uganda border called Chebukaka. While I was there, an aid agency decided to put a well in the village.

From the beginning, it became obvious that the well was being damaged regularly. The women in the village claimed it was accidental damage caused by cattle. After this had happened so many times, the priest I was working with asked me to speak to the girls I was teaching to see if I could find out why it was happening.

Eventually, a young girl explained that it was the women who were damaging the well because they didn't want one in their village.

It made life much harder for them. Before the well, they used to go to the river together and take a break from working in the fields, and it gave them an opportunity to socialise with other women. Yes, they did want clean water and the benefits it brought, but not this way.

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— Bernadette, school volunteer

The women explained nobody had asked them what they wanted or needed. A European company thousands of miles away had decided for them without any consultation. When I first came home and heard of CAFOD, it was CAFOD's emphasis on working in partnership which really attracted me and inspired me. This way the people in developing countries are respected. More importantly they have a voice. They are listened to.

Can you tell us about what it's like to be a school volunteer?

It's such a privilege. I remember one assembly I did about Rabiul in Bangladesh - there was a child in the class from a village similar to Rabiul's who related his own story. This 8-year-old boy was so proud to tell his class that he knew children like Rabiul. It was very moving seeing the child's pride and his classmate's reactions as he 'told' them his story. Now I always ask if there are any links with the countries that CAFOD is focusing on.

Because of the asylum seeker and refugee situation in Middlesbrough I have been privileged to meet many children from so many different developing countries. They are inspirational children, contributing so much to their schools and communities. I felt so privileged and humbled to meet these children, living life to the full here, but with such pride in their own memories and stories of their culture in their country of birth.

Do you have any heroes?

My heroes are people who embrace life fully, no matter what adversity is thrown their way. The kind of people who deal with brokenness daily but still reach out to make a better world for others. These to me are the courageous ones, always reaching out to touch and help others selflessly ignoring their own pain and vulnerability.

What would you say to someone thinking of volunteering for CAFOD?

Do it – it's worthwhile. You meet other lovely people who share their experiences of volunteering. The training days are always friendly. You come away feeling affirmed and thanked, and to be honest, there is always something or someone to smile and have fun with. It's a happy experience.