The world matters and teachers care:
Rewards of international volunteering

By Marian Dodds

“Are you a mercenary?” I asked. He mumbled something else. “Oh, a missionary.” No, he shook his head. Finally I got it: “Ah, you do masonry!” A few years back, I would never have envisioned myself having this conversation with a stranger wanting to practice his English on an overcrowded minibus careening through the stunningly beautiful northeastern highlands of rural Ethiopia. But here I am. Happily retired, having a grand adventure as a Cuso International volunteer in Ethiopia.

In September 2010 I found myself in Woldia, a rural town 520 km north of the capital city, assigned to teach the Higher Diploma Program (HDP) to the staff of the Woldia College of Teacher Education. The HDP is a Ministry of Education sponsored diploma designed to enhance the skills of university and teachers’ college instructors in active learning, reflective practice, continuous assessment, and action research. A lot like the Principles of Teaching I had once taught as a faculty associate at both SFU and UBC and something any BC teacher would find familiar.

I shared a house and classroom with Shelagh from Nottingham who was there to set up the college’s English Language Improvement Center. Together, as the only ferengi (foreigners) in the town, we shared a year of memorable experiences: everything from befriending a goat named ChoCho, enjoying Doro Wot (chicken and egg stew in very hot sauce) for breakfast with our landlady on religious festival days, juggling six invitations to people’s homes for Easter dinner, drinking endless tiny cups of coffee at coffee ceremonies, weekly Amharic lessons from an amazing Grade 12 boy to celebrating the birth of a colleague’s daughter. With good humour we coped with water and power cuts and got creative by improvising tasty meals on a hot plate using locally available ingredients.

And yes, we did our best to follow the mantra “Sharing Skills, Changing Lives.” Certainly our lives changed with this experience and we continue to keep in touch now that Shelagh is back in England. Since I am still in Ethiopia I have had visits from some Woldia teachers and others connect by phone. Thanks to world-shrinking technology we also use email and Facebook even if Ethiopian Internet remains “slow speed”! Will this change the world? Certainly not on any seismic scale. As teachers, we slowly the egg will walk” went through my head a lot those first few months.

It is absolutely fascinating to be in a place where the United Nations Millennium Development Goals are not just words on paper but the driving force for our work. And work there is! MDG #3: Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, guides our activities from the primary to secondary schools, in regional education bureaus, post secondary colleges, universities, and technical and vocational colleges. There’s a long road ahead for Ethiopia with wide gender gaps in education. Despite impressive improvements in enrolment in primary schools over the past 10 years and legislation and government policies to support gender equality, rampant sexual harassment, harmful traditional practices, such as child brides, and community attitudes that often do not value education for girls, remain key challenges.

Now living what I once only read about, while sitting in my office at the BCTF working with the Status of Women program in the 1980s and Social Justice for the last four years of my career, I thank the BCTF for encouraging me on the path that has led to where I now sit, in Room 309 of the Ethiopian Ministry of Education. The experience I gained working on BCTF staff to co-ordinate women’s rights and social justice initiatives including CIDA funded Global Classroom Initiatives, and by participating on CTF Project Overseas teams in Belize and Sierra Leone, all compounded to ignite in me a passion to pursue, in retirement, long-term international work on the ground in Africa.

Climbing the stairs to my office on the third floor of the massive Ministry of Education building in Addis Ababa, I think how many BC teachers have to offer the volunteer world. For fit and healthy retirees, volunteering presents an ideal opportunity to share skills we have developed over our careers, to give back to the wider world and to expand our own horizons. As with any voyage into the unknown, there are highs and lows and surprises that can horrified.

Cuso International is a non-profit development organization that works through volunteers. Each year, Cuso sends hundreds of global citizens to work on collaborative development projects in more than 20 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Cuso International engages committed, highly skilled volunteers, placing them with carefully selected organizations where a two-way knowledge exchange has a life-long impact on the volunteer, their colleagues, the organizations, and the communities for which they are based. Cuso International is currently recruiting teachers for placements starting in January 2013. To learn more about these opportunities go to:
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Buying onions (especially the toilets!), amaze or delight, no matter how much pre-departure preparation one does. A sense of humour, adaptability, being open to other worldviews, empathy and compassion are essentials for the volunteer’s inner backpack. The rewards are fascinating new learning, amazing cross cultural experiences, new friendships, a sense of purpose, and beyond borders interconnections to last the rest of one’s life.

You are invited to experience my volunteer life through my blog:

Marian Dodds, retired teacher

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