

Giving back to the world

"I learnt a lot about myself and my strengths and weaknesses"



Six weeks. Complete strangers. Cross-Culture shock. One rule: No expectations. Up for the challenge? I was! It turned out to be the most inspiring, eye-opening, difficult and life-altering experience of mine to date.

I initially decided to enrol myself to be a part of Youth Challenge Australia's Vanuatu projects because it would allow me to travel overseas, have the opportunity to actually live within a community and not just be a tourist and tick off the usual sites.

I wanted an adventure I could call my own. I wanted to travel to a country and be immersed in their way of life. And why not, while I was there and experiencing so much from their culture, give something back.

Youth Challenge Australia offered an extraordinary cross-cultural experience. It allowed me to work alongside like-minded passionate volunteers, experience another culture while living 'as the locals do', and working amongst the community, for the community.

In my time spent on the project, our group lived and worked in a primary school of the remote community of Laman. Our core project consisted of constructing a teacher's house providing stable housing for teachers and encouraging teacher placements to improve the education for students.

One of the best things about this project was that it was community identified, signifying its importance and urgent need, while displaying community ownership. It was a very encouraging environment, with the ultimate moment seeing the roof go up on the house that had not existed when we first arrived.

Other community development work was done through first aid training and the beginnings of a school library. These smaller projects were identified by my YCA group, and tested our skills, patience and persistence in seeing them through.

What was difficult about these tasks was surprisingly not the physical aspect, but the difficulty in communicating and general group dynamics. I learnt skills, taught skills and learned to give and take. I learnt a lot about myself and my strengths and weaknesses in dealing with particular situations. Having a strong team environment helped myself and my group through the

project, to tackle any problems that arose, and provided the motivation to get through it together. It was a caring family, dynamic and particularly special because you were sharing a one-off experience together.

Apart from the core project, the other half of our project time was spent immersing ourselves into the Ni-Vanuatu culture. We played with the always beaming children, attended church and local ceremonies and each enjoyed the company of the local people who welcomed us as if we were their own and introduced us to traditional recipes, black magic and local customs.

Not only do I feel that my participation in this project has strengthened and enhanced qualities in me as a person and changed my outlook on life and my future, but I feel that I achieved something and made a positive contribution to the future of Laman - especially in the friendships that we formed.

Youth Challenge Australia (YCA) is a non-profit, non-religious, non-government organisation that actively engages young Australian volunteers aged 18-30, in sustainable grassroots development projects.

Youth Challenge offers 5-12 week long-term sustainable projects in Vanuatu, Costa Rica, Guyana, Guatemala, India, Mexico and Central Australia.

To get involved visit: www.youthchallenge.org.au

Cathy Williams

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