

Aloysius Orphanage

Ethan Wilkins (ewilkins1@gmail.com)

Busan Songdo Elementary School

I have been volunteering at Aloysius Orphanage for the last six months. Also referred to as Boy's and Girl's Town, Aloysius is an orphanage in the Songdo neighborhood of Busan, with about 500 children. Every Monday I teach an English class for 12 1st grade boys. I also coordinate the volunteers for these classes. One Saturday a month I join a volunteer group that does sports with high-school boys, and arts-and-crafts with the elementary ones. I also started a weekly English class for 3rd – 6th grade girls.

We teach our Monday night classes in a classroom at the girl's orphanage that has very limited materials, just colored pencils and markers. A typical 50 minute class starts with coloring pages and then morphs into game and play time. Our aim is to teach the children English while also giving them a lot of individual attention and affection, and providing them with a positive experience with foreigners.

My desire to work at the orphanage started the first day I arrived at school. As I sat down at my desk, I found a note from the teacher before me. She gave me some helpful information about my apartment, the neighborhood, and the school. It was all very exciting and very helpful. But when I eventually got to a part where she informed me that many of the students are orphans, my heart got heavy. She asked me to give them extra love and attention and she suggested that I volunteer at the orphanage once a week teaching English, as she had done. I was very touched and immediately determined to start volunteering.

It took a lot of time and effort to find out about the volunteer events at the orphanage, but I was eventually able to join one of the Saturday volunteer days set up by Busan Volunteers. I had a fantastic time playing with kids and discovered that a couple of them were, in fact, my students. I talked to a couple of people about volunteering there regularly. Again, it was very difficult to find the right information and to make this happen, but I persisted, and after many attempts, I was finally able to start teaching English to first grade boys every Monday.

The classes turned out to be wonderful. They are often very tiring as the kids have so much energy and constantly demand piggy-back rides, lifts in the air, and simply the right to climb all over you. I was surprised and impressed by their English ability. Most of them know their alphabet and many have a good grasp of basic words. It is so rewarding to see them get excited about learning.

As first graders, none of the boys in the class are my students, though a few of them do attend my school. Before and after the classes, however, I started to see many of my girl students hanging around. I came to learn that the location for the classroom is on the girl's campus and many of my students live or have classes in the building in which we teach.

At first it was so great to see my girls. Eventually, however, I started to feel bad when they would be peering in the window at our class. Sometimes they would stand in the doorway or come into the classroom to say hi and I would eventually have to usher them out.

I asked about classes for the girls and if I could volunteer at those, only to learn that there were none. It started to break my heart that these girls didn't have a similar opportunity as the boys. I resolved that I would fix that and decided to start a girl's English class.

After the initial hurdles I had experience trying to get involved with volunteering, I assumed that it would be a long laborious task to start a whole new weekly class, and that we would first

began monthly volunteer sessions and then expand to weekly classes in the next school year. I sent off emails to those that I thought would best be able to help me. After a couple of false starts, I received a message that we could begin weekly classes on Tuesday nights.

This was fantastic news and I set about starting to recruit. I received some very useful advice from Katherine Herrmann and Claire Hah. Using the Busan Volunteer page and other foreign teacher orientated pages, we quickly amassed a large group of volunteers. It was so large, in fact, that they decided to split into two groups and switch off weeks. This made it possible for more people to attend regularly and created a consistent group of teachers for the girls. The classes have proven so popular that another class for 3rd grade girls was just added on Sunday mornings.

The start of the girl's classes came right around a shift in the boys classes. When I started with the orphanage, there was a core group of volunteers that had been working there for the past six months or so. A couple months after I started, that group started to fall apart. Some teachers were leaving Korea, others had obligations that simply meant they couldn't be at the orphanage every week. It became clear that we would need more volunteers in order to keep the classes going.

Fortunately, just at this time I received an invitation from Mimi Choe to speak at the upcoming orientation for new EPIK teachers. Between this opportunity, and the exposure received from starting the girl's classes, I was able to recruit a large and well-qualified group of volunteers.

The teachers on Monday nights now include a Korean elementary teacher earning a masters in English Education, a university assistant professor, a GET who speaks fluent Korean, and a half-dozen other teachers who all are very passionate about volunteering.

This has sparked a change in how we run classes, with a new focus on continuous phonics education, complete with individualized folders, worksheets, and nametags. It also allows for a lot more attention for each student.

Volunteering at the orphanage has been incredibly beneficial to my teaching at school. Working with first graders has increased my patience. Teaching with almost no materials has improved my resourcefulness. My discipline and lesson planning skills have improved as well.

Beyond the improvement in my skill set, volunteering has strengthened my relationships with my students. I understand better what their life is like living at an orphanage and they know that I care enough about them to donate my time. Even the students who don't live at Aloysius or even know that I work there, seem to be able to pick up on my involvement in the community. This connection with my students was my primary motivation for getting involved and it has proven to be even more rewarding than I had imagined.

While classes only last about an hour, there is a lot of additional work necessary to make them happen. Each week requires lesson planning, material preparation, assigning someone to bring treats, and confirming who will be attending. This is the minimum.

The real work comes when expanding the program. There are many emails that need to be sent back and forth through the translator and the orphanage in order to set up new classes. Finding new volunteers requires a lot of recruiting work, both through the internet and face-to-face efforts. Then I need to coordinate all the new volunteers, answering their questions, giving directions, and making sure they are ready and excited to work with the kids.

I have very high hopes and expectations for the future of English classes at Aloysius. My mission is to offer more and better classes to the kids at the orphanage. I would like to improve the quality in part by improving the materials we have. The orphanage has very limited funds for things such as books, whiteboards, and projectors. Through a combination of fundraisers and grants, I plan to create a materials budget that will allow us to purchase educational tools.

I would also like to increase the number of classes provided. When I started we were only reaching a dozen of the hundreds of kids at the orphanage. In the last few months we have tripled that.

With continued recruitment efforts, I believe we will eventually be able to offer English classes to all elementary students at the orphanage that wish to take them.

In order to achieve this goal, we will maintain a strong facebook presence, use the local English media, and continue to take advantages of the opportunities EPIK is providing. I am incredibly thankful for having the opportunity to talk to all the incoming teachers at the Daejeon Orientation, for the inclusion of a volunteer information page in the new EPIK teacher's manual, and the recognition of volunteers through this award. Together, these will help to greatly increase the number of volunteers not only at Aloysius Orphanage, but all over Korea.

I plan on staying in Korea for at least another year, and my volunteer work is a very big part of that decision. Volunteering has made me even happier here than I would have been. Everyday I leave the orphanage I feel refreshed and renewed. It gives me a sense of purpose and meaning. I want to stay because I want to see the English classes improve; there is a lot of work to do and I want to stay here and see that through.

Volunteering has given me purpose and meaning. It has improved my teaching and organizational skills. It has brought me closer to my students and my community. It has enriched my mind and touched my heart. Volunteering has been, and will continue to be, an essential part of my life in Korea.

