

Immersed In Korea

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Education is a crucial part of childhood development. Encouraging, inspiring and challenging children to reach their full potential is both rewarding and enriching, and something I feel very passionate about. Volunteering here in Korea has vastly helped me build close relationships with my students whilst working for the EPIK Program.

The Mannam Volunteering Association reaches out to its immediate community, catering for both Koreans and foreigners throughout the country. I have been an honorary volunteer of Mannam ever since I arrived to Korea in August last year. I was instantly drawn ever since a member of their team approached me as I was longing to become accustomed to the Korean culture. It felt like the perfect opportunity at the time, and I definitely made the right decision.

Mannam offers an assortment of classes and clubs, including cooking classes, language classes, k-pop dance, sports-soccer, basketball, running, taekwondo and judo-some of which I'm a member of. These are all free and run by volunteers themselves-some of the most loving, open-minded and incredibly hard-working individuals I've ever come across.

As a graphic design graduate, I too voluntarily create promotional material and I have designed and printed club t-shirts. I thrive off challenges and enjoy getting stuck into small projects with the teams. I frequently help the team to update blogs and keep the community up-to-date with events.

Over the year, I have progressed and taken on the role of a committee member position with Mannam, helping to plan big events that take place in Seoul and throughout Korea. We regularly arrange orphanage visits, day-center trips for helping the elderly, and fundraising events for charities both in Korea and worldwide.

The orphanage visits with Mannam are always an incredibly heartwarming experience. Being part of one's development and learning, helping the orphans improve their skills is immeasurable. Having recently lost a niece due a rare disease has brought me closer to the less fortunate; seeing their huge smiles, watching them run towards you and feeling them clutch your hands tightly is always a very precious moment. Contributing to their achievement and assisting them in grasping a basic understanding of the English language is an inspiration for me, an added incentive that cannot be taken away.

As diligent workers on the committee, we often hold project meetings and support campaigns that our friends are in charge of. We arrange monthly environmental operations, which have been a huge success. Some of the most successful events have included an open-mic charity fundraising event, an afternoon planting sweet-potato and pruning grape vines at Doraemi Village on Ganghwa Island (100+ volunteers) and delivering coal and food to the less fortunate to residents in Guryong Village, a poverty-stricken area in the midst of Seoul's dense predominantly affluent/ middle classed community (300+ volunteers).

Our biggest event to date was 'Earth Day' (April 22nd 2012), a day held annually throughout the world to increase awareness of the natural environment. In celebration of this important day, Mannam decided to host a volunteering event at the Bukhan Mountain National Park, Seoul, that month. With the help of hundreds of volunteers, we spent a couple of weekends wrapping oak trees in biodegradable film to stop them dying from 'wilt disease'-exacerbated by air pollution and high carbon dioxide levels-in an effort to prevent the disease from spreading further. Other large scale national festivals, social gatherings, sports days, cultural expos are all also supported and run by volunteers with the aim of giving something back to the community and promoting various causes.

With a huge interest in art and design, I have managed three school painting projects in Seoul over the last 6 months. These have involved working closely with fellow Korean team members to contact schools that are in need to beautification and would like us to assist in doing so. Providing the schools have had the funding for paints and materials, we have gathered over 50 volunteers and devoted weekends at these three schools.

Our first project was based at Yangduck Elementary School (Soyosan), and the team worked tirelessly in the coordination of the event. We given templates and basically asked to transfer them to the buildings and surrounding elongated steps along the playground. The event went off relatively smoothly, but that is not to say it went was without hiccups and challenges. The event was also attended by a platoon of young men from the US military, who are always looking to get in volunteering hours as part of their contracts. The event was a great success and I have to say, the best part about dealing with people is noticing such charisma and unpredictability in their talents. Many friends and team members rose to the occasion and showcased their hidden abilities such as leadership and creativity.

Due to the success of our first project, we hosted our second painting event at Jumong School, catering for mentally and physically disabled children (based in Myeongil, Seoul). Solely managing this event with other fellow artists and graphic designers, I was lot more nervous as there as the principalexclusively wanted childlike anime and Korean cartoon characterspainting alongside two outdoor surrounding walls of the school building. Yet over a 12-hour period, we again successfully managed to complete the project in the swelteringconditions.I arrived at 7am to draw up the sketches and have things ready for the volunteers at midday. I delegated tasks for volunteers as they arrived, split up teams and had them look after a section of the mural each. This worked well as I was able to monitor the progress and estimate the timing throughout the day. Watching the big smiles on the children's faces as they came out to see the new walls in their wheelchairs at the end of the day was a priceless moment and one that I will never forget.

We held out third painting project last month at Jungin School (Onsu station, Seoul), another education facility for the mentally and physically disabled. The administration staff at this this school requested that we paint a whimsical, child-friendly mural two indoor walkways. Yet again, the staff was impressed with the result, and requested that we go back in the new year to continue the designs into the neighboring buildings!

All three events required a lot of commitment and planning (-regular meeting to sketch out designs, constantly on the telephone to order paints/materials, planning field trips to estimate the time it would take for me to draw the murals) but it's always a rewarding

feeling to get positive feedback from the staff. I have thoroughly enjoyed managing the projects and I look forward to ones in the new years once the weather progresses next year. I have planned the promotion of these events through networking site Facebook/MeetUp to ensure a smooth registration process in for new Mannam members. We recently set up our very own blog that we use to publicize past events and announce upcoming projects that require a specific registration process. (*Please take a look using the link provided).

As an NSET here in Korea, I believe that being able to understand your students and being a relational teacher can be a powerful and effective tool. My volunteering experience to date has not only helped me to better my confidence whilst working in a classroom environment, but the occurrences that I've witnessed throughout my day to day volunteering roles have helped me to appreciate the difficulties Korean students face in schools. When I'm working, I perceive everyday as a new challenge. Every class at school is a new challenge, as is every event I manage. I know there are always challenges in both roles, but I'm always willing to rise to them. Life's not perfect, and we can only work together to better our society and help people live in harmony. I feel Mannam has drawn a whole new perspective on life for me, and I'm incredibly thankful to such a heartwarming, loving Korean community that I've worked with over the last year.

I believe the roles I have had with Mannam have taught me the fundamentals of team leadership as I've instantaneously been put under sticky situations with minutes to create a solution, in particular working under bad weather conditions and having to deal with injuries. In Korea, and as teachers, we are perceived as role models and I believe these roles have allowed me to encourage young adults in a positive way. In the classroom, I believe interactive learning is imperative and children should be stimulated through imaginative and creative lessons, in a secure and nurturing environment.

Having thoroughly documented all three painting projects for the Mannam blog I take care of, I frequently show off my work to my students and they're amazed by it. I've recently been approached by my co-workers asking me to paint a mural both inside and outside the school building, with the help of students. Throughout my life I have built friendships with individuals from many different cultures and religious backgrounds. I have learnt about their traditions and customs and how it is vital to deal cautiously and respectfully with problems based on cultural differences.

Volunteering, although challenging, provides a genuine opportunity to affect people's lives in a constructive and influential way. Not only does it fulfill my desire to give something back, but also I feel inspired by the Korean community's eagerness to also help.

I've always attempted to not be afraid of failure. I believe I'm a very conscientious yet timid individual, with a keen and positive attitude to work. I'm always willing to answer other's questions as it helped me feel more self-assured about my learning ways. I understand that discovering certain qualities about yourself is not always clear, and it takes time. But once you realize your learning strengths and weaknesses, you constantly strive to make changes in order to better your learning ways. Everybody is faced with many difficult challenges throughout life, and being able to make sense of new information on a daily basis is not always easy. Teaching and volunteering here in Korea has been such an overwhelming experience. Coming from a minority background has not only taught me to respect other cultures and ways of life, but it has skilled me linguistically on addressing

situations when faces with cultural differences. Students feed off energy. Definitely the language barrier has challenges here, but that's one thing I really like about volunteering. Even though it's sometimes hard to communicate, you can still understand people's hearts and notice the love without any words.

I believe I am a good-natured, confident and independent individual with a warm and energetic communication style. I have a strong passion for new experiences and I am always willing to meet new people. My previous employment in England and volunteering positions have given me experience in managing teams whilst working on key areas personal development, motivation and confidence. Some of the most worthwhile challenges I have embarked on include my various roles of dependability at University, and the key skills and attributes that I have gained from my work experiences as a Student-In-Classroom Associate, Student Ambassador, Course Representative, Peer Educator and Aim Higher Mentor, include working with others through the effective use of group work as well as problem solving skills which I feel are extremely vital in the teaching profession.

I have taken part in various other events with Mannam and if you would like to hear more about these, I would love to share my experiences with you. My involvement with Mannam has drawn me closer to Korea's captivating culture, so rich in history and tradition. The quality of South Korea's education system and high levels of student attainment has provided an excellent foundation for my future professional and personal development. I will surely miss this country and will always cherish the moments I've had here. We have various Christmas-related events coming up next month, as well as akimchi-making project next month- distributing it alongside other food packages to the homeless shelters around Seoul.

***Alongside my volunteering with Mannam, I have very recently become involved with Pscore (People for Successful Corean Reunification), an organization that provides North Korean refugees with education and offering them information about the outside world in order to let the defectors compare and critically analyze the situation inside North Korea. The organization, quite recently set up in the heart of Seoul, is actively involved in assisting North Korean refugees with their daily lives in South Korean and offering them advice.*

The offer a 1:1 tutoring program (for teacher who would like to voluntarily tutor North Korean defector students in English, math and essay writing), Wednesday English classes (helping with pronunciation and speaking skills), and monthly activities held to help North/South Korean university students communicate. I was interviewed and selected to take part in their annual Global English Camp as an instructor for a weekend earlier this month, where I co-managed a team of North Koreans defectors and partook in a wide range of team building activities. I thoroughly enjoyed the weekend and I'm eagerly looking forward to attending their English classes later this month. (Due to the protection of the refugees, I am not able to support this with photographs but references from staff are available on request if need be). More info at: http://pscore.org/xen/en_home

"Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has" - Margaret Mead