

## Volunteering in Korea

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I usually do a lot of volunteering at home in the UK so when I came to Korea I really wanted to get involved in something. I had a bit of a problem when I first arrived because my Korean language skills were pretty non-existent, so it was really difficult to find volunteering opportunities. Also, back home I'd always taken part in the Samaritan's Shoe Box Appeal which organises Christmas gifts for disadvantaged children. Two friends and I were talking about this one evening, we'd had a look around, searched the internet, asked people we knew, but no-one knew of a similar appeal in Korea. So, the three of us decided to set up our own organisation. We already knew of one orphanage in Daegu and a lady who helped out there. It turned out that the lady actually worked for the Suseong-Gu Office International Relations Team and she was really helpful in finding us 3 more orphanages to work with. So, we knew we had around 150 kids who we could potentially buy gifts for. From all this, Daegu's Time To Give was born. We decided to set up our own charity to provide opportunities for ex-pats, like ourselves, to get involved and give something back to the community we live in.

With our new venture, we started our first 'Give a Gift Appeal' in November 2011. The idea was the you could collect a bag from any one of the three collection and drop off points, manned by the Daegu's Time To Give team, fill the bag with lovely gifts totaling no more than 20,000 Won and then bring it back to us. We advertised on Facebook, in local ex-pat magazines and anywhere and everywhere we could. The response was brilliant. After sitting at collection points for a total of over 24 hours each (across different days of course) and having met so many lovely people who wanted to help out, there were enough gifts for just under 200 children in Daegu. We found two more orphanages who wanted to join in the festive fun and with my boyfriend dressing up as Santa we handed all the gifts out on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. You could see that at first the kids were a bit skeptical and distinctly reserved about what was going on, but the looks on their little faces when they opened up their bags were just so cute. They were so excited and it was just great to see. I remember this little boy who'd been given a monster face backpack, he was so chuffed and wouldn't put it down. We were the lucky ones really though because we got to deliver all the gifts. One orphanage even put on a show for us. It was so adorable. They had costumes and everything. There was even a Taekwondo section with some knee high elementary school boys breaking wooden blocks. One of the boys, well I swear that smile was painted on his face because it didn't budge the whole time we were there. We got such a buzz from doing it and the children were so happy.

After Christmas we decided to split our roles and I'll tell you a bit more about what I get up to. We divided our roles into Fundraising and Events, Promotions and Volunteering. I took on the volunteering side of things. I wanted to help out by being a bridge between the

foreigners living in Daegu and volunteering opportunities. Most of my friends here are teachers and many of them wanted to give something back so I realised that there was potential there for us to provide English language tutoring to the children. It tends to be the case that children from richer families have the best English; perhaps because they can afford to pay for extra English classes at Hagwons. So I figured that one of the biggest contributions that we can make to these kids' lives is to help improve their English and hopefully that will improve their prospects for the future. I now work closely with Suseong-Gu Office and another 2 orphanages in Daegu to find opportunities for foreigners to volunteer. So far this year I've placed 30 volunteers and have around 15 volunteers working on a regular basis at any one time. The volunteers work in a range of roles from tutoring middle school and elementary students to learning English through play sessions with younger children. Daegu's Time To Give also organises one off events with the children. This year we've had story time, been to a baseball game and had a spooky Halloween party. We've also had volunteers come along for those events too and everyone's had a great time.

As well as my work with Daegu's Time To Give, I also volunteer with 2 elementary classes once a month. The placement is organised through Suseong-Gu Office, for children from low income families. It's such a rewarding experience. Don't get me wrong, I love my job at a middle school and I love my students but my classes have 42 students and I see them once a week. So unfortunately it's really difficult to get to know any of my regular students on a first name basis. However with volunteering I teach a really small group (there's usually 6 in each class). I've been working with them since March and so we're all good friends now. For example I know that Julie likes to read comics and you have to watch her in class, Leah and Jason are brother and sister and they really look after each other and Bob absolutely loves games. In case you were wondering they had already chosen their English names before I got to class and they seemed pretty proud of them, so who I am to question! It's so rewarding having the opportunity to get to know these kids and actually see them improve with every class. They are quite low level so even though they are in 5th and 6th grade elementary they can't form many sentences, so it's definitely challenging trying to think of a 40 minute lesson around vocabulary of maybe 8 words but it's definitely worth it. It's the small things, like being given high fives and cuddles when I come into the classroom. It took a good few lessons for them to warm up to me and for me to understand their level and their needs. That adjustment period was really difficult, they were too shy to talk to me, didn't seem to enjoy it much and I didn't know if they were learning. I was just questioning everything. But after a few sessions we really started to click and now I don't know how I'm going to be able to say goodbye to them when I leave. Last week the students learned colours and it was so satisfying when at the bowling alley yesterday the students were asking for their bowling balls by referring to the color in English...success!

Working for Daegu's Time To Give is something that I do on an almost daily basis. Most of my time is spent finding and managing placements for volunteers, liaising with third parties (for example orphanage managers), managing the accounts and all of our finances and responding to general requests for information about our organisation. However I've also organised soccer coaching, a baseball game, a party at an orphanage and bowling. To do all

this work I can use my lunch hour or time before school, but it does often encroach on my evenings and weekends. In terms of my volunteering, I teach two classes 1 or 2 times a month. I usually spend around an hour preparing for each class. All in all my voluntary work does mean that I give up my spare time, but I'm really passionate about what I do and I feel a great sense of achievement knowing that I'm making a positive contribution to these children's lives

Volunteering also gives me an insight into a side of Korea I wouldn't usually see as a foreigner and introduces me to people outside of the education system. I know that most of the Korean people I met at first were co-teachers from my school. That's great but meeting people from other walks of life gives my Korean experience another dimension and gives me a more rounded understanding of the country.

I've met some remarkable people, from foreigners who give up their free time to volunteer, to the Korean men and women who dedicate their lives to helping disadvantaged children, to the lovely little ones I volunteer to teach. I think this is the best think about volunteering and that's why I do it.



Give a Gift Appeal 2011



Bowling party!



My bowling coach Jenny