

Work for a cause, not for applause

It seems to me that some of the best things in life happen pure coincidentally. For me, my volunteer work with Child's Dream certainly belongs to that category. I had just gotten back to Austria after seven weeks of backpacking through South America when I got an email from my best friend (she studies at HSG in Switzerland) with a link to Child's Dream's website; offering a volunteer position as a "Database User's Manual writer" in their head office in Chiang Mai. I read the offer, navigated through the website and was immediately interested in getting to know this NGO better, so I started writing my motivational letter right away and submitted my application. I was exhilarated when I got my acceptance email a few days later and excited about booking my flight to Thailand. I had already spent the past 5 months travelling and South East Asia was next on my travel bucket list, so I thought it would be a great opportunity for me to experience living in the culture for a little while. Since I am planning on applying my professional background (I have a degree in Accounting & Financial Management) in the Non-Profit world after my travels this is a great chance for me to getting inside knowledge and gaining experience in the foreign territory of charities & NGOs. I had quit my previous job (in a Big 4 auditing company in Austria) because I felt that my job was meaningless; that whether I showed up for work or not it would not make a difference. I was hoping to gain a different perspective by working in an NGO – especially since I was really impressed by Child's Dream's founding story already.

After a few crazy days (and nights) in Bangkok I arrived in Chiang Mai and felt immediately at home here – the city has such a calm and easy-going vibe and I could easily see myself living here for a while. The same applied for Child's Dream – after my first day I felt fully welcome and accepted, everyone was really nice and I have never been in such a happy and at the same time productive working environment. I started my task with Michel, the IT genius, by writing a User's Manual for the Contacts Database. This was really interesting and challenging for me since he did not give me any instructions but simply installed the test application on my desktop and said "GO!". Well, so I did, and by working on my own I got to know the database very well. After I successfully finished my first manual I asked Michel for the next database – and this cycle repeated itself until I had finished the manuals for all databases; with still more than a month left of my assignment.

Thankfully, Gene stepped in and introduced me to the world of reporting. He showed me everything there is to know about Proposals, Final Reports, Semester Reports, Fact Sheets, etc.- which is quite a lot. I am really grateful that I had the opportunity to work on the reports since this provided me with substantial knowledge of the projects and programs going on at Child's Dream. I worked on reports for school buildings, playgrounds, boarding houses, youth programs and I could really see the positive impact – or better said the positive difference – that Child's Dream brought to the communities. My favorite part was always the picture section of the final report – when you could compare the old, rotten and deteriorating original school buildings with the new, clean and safe school buildings that Child's Dream had constructed.

After writing a lot of reports, maintaining the Contacts Database and doing various other tasks I was back to my original task with Michel for a while. He was working on a new Projects Database and I was the first test user; while simultaneously writing a User's Manual for the parts that were already finished. This was a task that I truly enjoyed – I had always had a keen interest in IT and it was really exciting for me to work with a new application, to discuss with Michel if something did not work or I did not understand something and – the most fascinating thing – to get a new and improved version a short time later.

And now here I am, working on one of my final tasks – the volunteer report at the end of my assignment. Two months is not a very long period to begin with, but I still can't believe how fast those weeks went by. I tried so many new things here (Yoga, Massage course, Ukulele lessons, going Vegan), went to a lot of different places (Pai, Krabi, Phuket, Koh Phi Phi), learned incredibly much and most importantly, I met really amazing people. It is usually the people that make the difference between a good and a great experience; and it was the people here at Child's Dream that not only met but exceeded my expectations. As I mentioned in the beginning I was looking for meaningful work, for a something that would not only keep me occupied from 8-5 but also something that would make a difference. And even though I was working in the head office, not in the field; and even though I was just here for 2 months; and even though I was just a volunteer – I felt like I did help, I did contribute to a good cause and I did make a difference – even if it was just a small one.

So this is it – hopefully not a “Good bye”, but a “See you again”!!!



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