

### **A summer to remember at St Mary's Secondary School**

This summer I have been volunteering in Kakamega, Kenya as a "Project Worker" for a charity called Education Partnerships Africa. This charity works with Sub-County schools (the most underfunded kind) in Kisii and Kakamega in Kenya and Mbarara in Uganda.

I have been based at St Mary's Mukhuma Secondary School in the nearby community and have been partnered with two other project workers. The aim of our charitable work is to improve the educational opportunities at the school.

Each Project Worker commits to fundraise £900 for their school, which contributes to an investment pot. As I was in a trio, this meant an initial budget of £2700. However, our trio carried out extra fundraising and successfully applied to additional grants from our central charity, such as the "Innovation Pot", which gives Project Workers money for innovative and exciting projects. This supplementary fundraising meant that our budget increased to around £5000.

As a result, our team has been able to achieve a great deal in St Mary's school. To be precise we have:

1. Installed a functioning laboratory
2. Installed a functioning library
3. Renovated a spare classroom
4. Improved the storage of the laboratory storage room
5. Improved the storage in the laboratory technician's room
6. Constructed handwashing stations
7. Repaired the girls' toilets
8. Improved kitchen hygiene through purchasing chopping boards
9. Implemented a rubbish bin system
10. Created a careers' service noticeboard
11. Carried out lobbying and secured funding from local politicians, such as the local MP.

Through this project I have gained many transferable skills, such as a greater understanding of complex budgeting, time management and leadership skill. In addition, as we have been working in Kenya, I have had to adapt to cultural differences and learnt to carry out the projects in an unfamiliar environment.

As well as the challenging yet interesting and rewarding work in Kenya, I have forged real friendships here. I have been living with the Headteacher of St Mary's School and her family. From the moment we stepped over the threshold we came an instant part of the Wasilwa family – we have been to dinners, we have cooked for them, we have met the whole extended family and been to their houses, given speeches at family occasions... we have even been to a funeral.

Two family members especially stand out to me: Jerida, the headteacher and Ken, a boy she adopted after he was cast out of his own family. Jerida is the most incredible woman; she is empowered, inspirational and has been an asset to our project work. She is also great fun – I go to the gym with her four times a week and have even been to a Zumba class (with my lack of rhythm, this was highly entertaining for all). Ken has been a great friend to us in Kenya. I run with him several times a week and we enjoy watching films from home with him.

The Wasilwa family have treated us with kindness and generosity and I would love to host them in the UK.

We have also relished the opportunity to get to know the students of St Mary's, whom we see every day. There is one group of Form Four students (the final year of secondary school) in particular who come to our office and speak to us at lunchtime and after class. Not only has this been valuable for the project, as we have acquired a greater understanding of the school, we have really appreciated becoming friends with them. They are the most remarkable students and work extremely hard to achieve their grades. As an example, they wake up to study at 3:00am and have a 12-hour school day. I hope to stay in contact with the school to find out where their futures take them.

I have had the most memorable of summers in Kenya and would recommend the experience to anyone!

## Report for Reg Gilbert International Friendship Trust





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