

My Ugandan Venture – July to September, 2015



(Papa Fred, Myself, Ketty, Mamma Lydia, and the two sisters Patience & Precious)

Pre-Placement

I had always dreamt of going back to Africa after visiting Kenya back in 2007 with my Mum, for a two week holiday, it was such an amazing place with so many inspiring people so I wanted to go back and explore more and get more involved, rather than just being a tourist. This is why began I researching charity programmes and came across International Citizen Service (ICS) which are part of Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) and have many programmes placed all over the world doing a variety of things; sport, counselling, arts etc. However, I dug a little deeper and found a relatively new programme called ICS Entrepreneur (ICSE). Considering I studied Business at University I thought this would be a great opportunity to put my work into action and also my interests as I would like to even start up my own business one day. Within ICSE there were four programmes but I was immediately attracted to the Balloon Ventures programme.

Balloon Ventures initially started in Kenya but is now placed in Uganda and even expanding to Ghana later this year. It was founded by Josh and Doug, who were out of University travelling around realising the lack of job opportunity for young people and a desire to make a change. The three month placement enables a group of UK volunteers (UKVS) to work with in country volunteers (ICVS) from other parts of the selected country, to come together and work with local entrepreneurs. It begins by a week of curriculum training and then initially teaching the entrepreneurs this curriculum and then going out to test ideas together and in the end, if needed, help them pitch for a small and interest free loan to help build their business sustainably. It is also required to live with a host home for the duration of the placement!

After finding the Balloon Ventures programme it sounded perfect, so I applied straight away and waited nervously for a response. When I received the phone-call inviting for an assessment day I was extremely excited and began researching previous Balloon stories and further information on the programme and potential countries! I found the assessment day a great way to interact with

likeminded people and also a good way to prepare a bit more for the possibility of living in a developing country for three months. The assessment day was over in a flash (even though it was actually a full working day!) and then off again to wait for a response – which came a week later informing I would need to attend a training weekend in two months time, along with fundraising £800 towards the charity to enable them to continue their amazing work.

Fundraising was a fun way to spread the word about Balloon Ventures and I completed many crazy challenges, including a chilli eating challenge and also a 'dress ridiculous to work day' with a cake sale. I managed to raise almost all of the target through these challenges, but decided to write to GIFT to apply for a bursary to help me reach my goal as I seemed to be a perfect candidate – and I so gratefully received a cheque and managed to even exceed my target!



(Chilli challenge items)



(Dress crazy to work day)

The weeks leading up to the departure day were exciting but also pretty terrifying – where will I be living? What will my counterpart be like? What if I don't get on with my working group team? What if the entrepreneurs don't understand? And a million other questions. So when we arrived at the hotel to meet the ICVS, after an incredibly long 24 hour journey, it was so nice to instantly feel refreshed and excited to meet everyone. We were a group of 11 UKVS and 11 ICVS, 2 team leaders (1 UKV and 1 ICV) and a UK programme coordinator – so it was quite a big group, and definitely one of the largest that Balloon have had!

Placement

The first week we all stayed at a small hotel called Reliance, as we had a week of training to learn the Balloon curriculum and the team leaders had a task to select who to group together! The Balloon curriculum was interesting to learn and it was a mixture of practical and theory which I enjoyed, as I really like to go out and get things done and see a change – even though it was quite nerveing to go out into town alone for the first time and complete the practical work with the locals, but it soon became an everyday thing and an opportunity to meet so many different people and their stories and soon feel like a local yourself! Hailing down my first Boda-Boda (a motorbike) was terrifying but we were equipped with helmets and safety advice and it soon became such a fun method of transport!

At the end of the week of curriculum training, we were able to have our first group social as it was a couple team members' birthdays, so we took this opportunity to head to a local bar – it was a really fun night but my do these guys LOVE to dance!!! I'm not a big dancer myself but they did not let anyone stand still, it was crazy but a great way to socialise together. The day after the social, it was

announced who we would be partnered up with to live and work with.... I was grouped with Geoffrey and Mercy as a working group, and Ketty would be my counterpart at the host home! Now is where it really all begins!

Moving day from the hotel to the host home was scary but I had Ketty there to ease the nerves, although she was just as nervous as me to meet the new family and our new home!! As we pulled up to the house down a rather long dirt track, but with the most amazing view of the mountain, our new family were standing outside to welcome us with big open arms and huge smiles. Our home was very basic with a tin roof and wooden windows, but it was decorated artistically like a seaside house in the UK with its blue and white stripes and shells.



(Our host home)

Our host Mamma Lydia was a primary school teacher, and also had a food market stall at the local market – she also turned out to be one of my entrepreneurs! Papa Fred was also a teacher at a private school and he also loved art – he was the one to paint the outside of the house! We then had two younger host sisters, Patience was aged 6 and Precious aged 5.

Ketty and I shared a room with two single beds and used another smaller room as a storage room for our belongings/walk in wardrobe! Ketty was initially quite quiet within the group, however as soon as we moved to the host home she opened up a lot more and felt a lot more comfortable and was always non-stop chatting with our host mamma.



(Ketty in our room)

As our host home was quite a walk away from the main road, there were a lot of creepy crawlies that came to the house, mainly cockroaches and crickets along with the occasional mouse. So being from the UK I found this quite uncomfortable at times going to sleep hearing creepy crawlies around, but Ketty helped me get used to them and taught me how to kill them quickly – also earplugs were a great item to pack! Chasing a mouse around the house with Papa Fred at bedtime will be a memory I won't forget anytime soon.

When it comes to food at the host home, or in Uganda in general, we had a lot of 'Irish' which were potatoes, matoke which is non-sweet banana and is a bit like potato which was delicious, posho which is maize flour formed into again a kind of mashed potato type food, and then rice and beans. We usually had it all together with some meat, either goat or cow I was never really sure which it was, or sometimes we had chicken as the family had a few chickens so Papa Fred would slaughter the chicken for dinner – I even helped to pluck and prepare it once!

One of the most odd dinnertimes has to be coming home to see a cow's heel in a dish being cooked – apparently it is full of calcium – I tried a bit to be polite but they could tell I did not enjoy it and found it very funny. Another dish we had a lot is ginut's, they are like peanuts but in a red shell – you could have them roasted or mashed into a sauce – the sauce was a really nice addition to the potatoes! I once brought home some fish from the market for us to have for dinner – it was incredibly tasty, think it was called a Tilapia fish. I did actually take some Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce with me as a UK gift which was a good addition for me but the host home didn't really enjoy it much..



(Mercy, Zam, Michael, Geoffrey, Nasib, Lydia, Stephen, Myself, Rebecca)

So onto the next important part – our entrepreneurs! Geoffrey, Mercy and I had six local entrepreneurs to work with for eight weeks, sharing some business models along with the thinking and testing of new ideas together in order to create more sustainable businesses, also with the chance to pitch for an interest free loan from Balloon in which we create pitching documents and evidence together.

Zam was a new start-up tailoring business lady who mainly needed help with cash flows, advertising and understanding her market and what they wanted. Michael owns his own metal fabrication

business and has been successful for a long time he just needed help in trying to grow a little further without using a loan. Nasib had recently purchased his own mobile money point (a bit like phone top-ups which could also be used as a money transfer rather than a bank account which many people did not have) his business needed help to get off the ground quicker as he had some previous issues when initially starting up. Lydia had her own market stall, which she had recently given up on due to not being able to buy in bulk and make enough profit to continue. Stephen has his own bar, The Rock View Bar, his main issue was lack of space and daily recordings/cash flow, along with the expense of hiring all his furniture. And last but not least is Rebecca, she owns her own successful cosmetics and beauty shop and just needed help with trying to manage stock and use current resources more efficiently. We had a good bunch!

Initially before arriving and meeting the team, I thought that the entrepreneurs wouldn't know very much about business and we would have to explain things quite a lot, however I couldn't have been more wrong as they all knew and understood everything so quickly and even questioned us on a few details, the only help they really wanted was someone to work together with and give a fresh perspective in order to grow the business further. So, over the 8 weeks working in our working group, we soon grew to know their businesses well and attempted to add in new brainstormed ideas using a small testing budget - some which worked and some which failed, but all of them enabled us to learn and continue trying to grow towards a sustainable future.

Working daily with the group and our entrepreneurs never really gave a 'work' feeling and was more like meeting up with friends to discuss business, although don't get me wrong – it was really hard at times, trying to get ideas to work and think of the best ways to improve a person's business. We were only there for 8 weeks, but they were there to do this for the rest of their future and they all had lovely families to support with these businesses – so at times it did feel pretty daunting but by the entrepreneurs being so excited to see positive changes happening it enabled us to keep on working hard and improving each day.

As it approached towards the end of the weeks working together, we had to start preparing the pitching documents for those entrepreneurs that wanted to pitch for the loan. We initially wanted 3 of the group to pitch (Stephen, Nasib and Lydia) as we believed they needed it most, but understandably Michael and Rebecca wanted the opportunity too, Zam was the only one that did not pitch. On pitching day it was such a mixture of emotions, meeting and waiting with each entrepreneur before they faced the panel giving some last words of courage, and then seeing how excited they were when they came out was a very proud moment. I especially won't forget Stephen's ever smiling face and huge cuddle when he came out from facing the panel and telling me how grateful he was but also how sad he was to see the programme ending and us leaving town soon. Nasib also told me afterwards in a moment of excitement that his wife was newly pregnant – such an emotional day!! Anyway off to celebrate after the stressful previous week of pitching documents, and how do Ugandan's like to celebrate? By partying and dancing!

After a few days off catching up with the rest of the group and having some chill out time with the host family, it finally came to pitching outcomes – just as we hoped Stephen was granted his loan to purchase his new fridge and furniture, Nasib was granted his loan to improve his mobile money limit and introduce more phone charging facilities and Lydia was granted her loan in order to improve her market stall storage facilities and stock! Unfortunately Michael and Rebecca did not receive the loan, but really this was a good outcome as we had proved that they didn't really need a loan and could use their available resources in order to grow without borrowing so they weren't too upset.

It seemed strange afterwards as all of the work leading up to pitching day was done, however we still visited the entrepreneurs at their businesses and socially as much as possible before leaving. We also decided to get more involved with the community and along with spreading the word recruiting new entrepreneurs and host families we volunteered with the local Ugandan Red Cross Society, visiting children's orphanage and also talking at a local University.

The night before our host family had prepared a delicious leaving dinner, Papa Fred sacrificed a cockerel and prepared it with matoke, potatoes, rice, beans and spinach. They also gave me and Ketty some leaving gifts; Ketty got some earrings and I got a necklace and lots of local coffee which I loved! We also gave them some gifts; Papa Fred an Arsenal shirt, Mama Lydia a bag and the two girl's cuddly giraffe toys which they wrapped in blankets and treated like babies, Patience even named hers baby Kara – adorable!

It was really sad to leave the host home getting picked up at 5am to head off to Entebbe for a couple of days of team debrief in order to reflect on the previous 9 weeks and spend some last quality time together at a full team. Leaving day soon approached and as expected it was emotional, most people in a puddle of tears! Saying bye to Ketty was tough and we gave gifts to each other (Ketty got me a bracelet and a local hand crafted bag, I gave her a bag to match her new outfit she purchased!). A few of the ICV's that were able to, joined us to the airport to give us a big cuddle and wave goodbye – I think I must have hugged Geoffrey a million times before leaving.

Post-Placement

Since being back in the UK I have continuously spoken to the team as we have a big WhatsApp messaging group with all 24 members – which I sometimes have to mute as it goes off ALL DAY but I love catching up reading all of the messages. I have also spoken to my host Mamma Lydia who updated me on her stall saying it's still going really well and that they have new host daughters moving in soon which is exciting! All of my entrepreneurs are doing well and Stephen has kept me informed on his business, he has even managed to open up another bar and hire an employee to manage it! I'm also very excited to be a part of Geoffrey's new piggery project he is starting in his home village.

The thing about Balloon Ventures is, they say they want to 'put you out of your comfort zone' now this is not a lie, every day there was a new challenge to overcome with your peers, which makes it such a great programme for personal development as well as meeting some great friends and helping towards sustainable economic development in a developing country. I definitely feel more confident going for interviews and have discovered my passion for business and development.

I had an amazing time in Uganda, even though at times it was tough being so far away from family and home comforts, it is such a beautiful place with so many amazing and inspiring people that you just had to look around and see the team and surroundings to remember what an amazing opportunity and experience it was and I can't wait to go back and visit everyone in the future!

Some favourite pictures from my journey:



(First meal, Team twister, Team in Stephen's bar, Teaching, Meeting the host sisters, Sipi falls walk)



(Sipi falls group social)



(Getting our helmets for our first trip into town)



(Kayaking group social)



(With our entrepreneurs at the award ceremony)



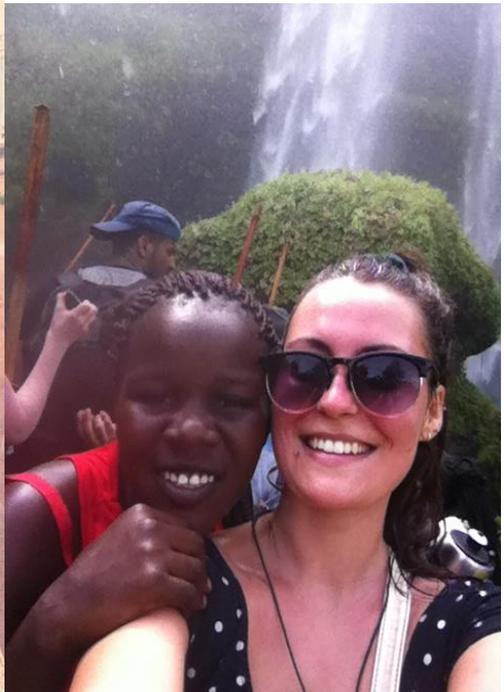
(Zam's tailoring materials)



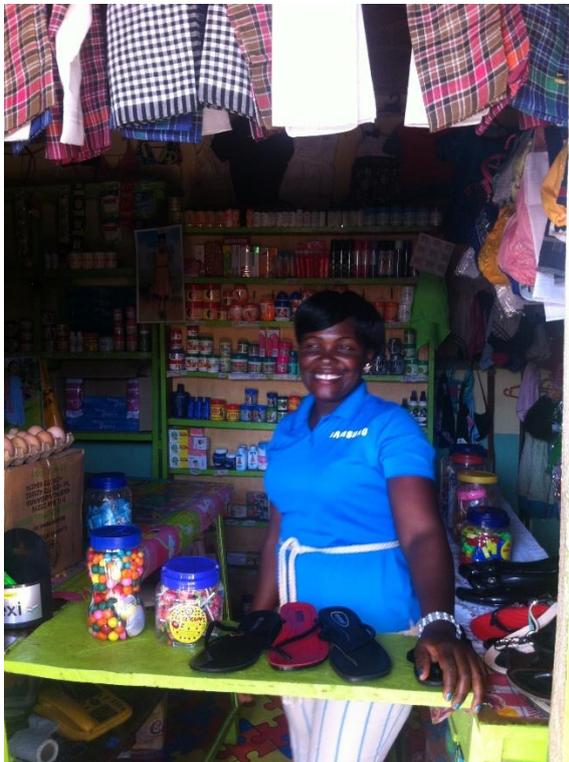
(Volunteering at the Red Cross)



(Locals playing checkers)



(With Ketty at Sipi falls)



(Women of HAWA, Rebecca at her shop, Mamma Lydia at her stall, View of the River Nile)



(With Stephen on pitching day)



(With Nasib and Michael on pitching day)



(Local street food lady selling cassava)



(Host sisters and their cuddly giraffes)



(Group photo with the girls)



(Saying goodbye at the airport)