

Hard work, many nice memories and very strong emotions, that's how I would describe UNCSO and my time in Namibia. It was a combination between work loaded weeks, with very nice but also with some sad events and adventurous weekends, during which we had the opportunity to explore the beauty of Namibia.

The welcome in the UNCSO family was a very warm one. On the first evening I was received with a nice dinner, consisting of the traditional springbok meat and accompanied by the also traditional sweet carrots, pumpkins and potatoes. Fortunately it was a habit of our hostess to prepare such nice dinners almost every evening after we came back exhausted from the center. Marianne always had an open ear and an open heart for problems, complains and suggestions and that made my mission easier during the three months of volunteer work.

It was difficult for me to imagine how the work with the children would be, if they would accept me and how I would manage to help them. Now, after three months, the answer to these questions is still difficult to put in words. In the beginning I was overwhelmed by the openness that most of the children showed us and the closeness they allowed before even knowing us. That was the first sign, that they yearn for love and attention, and that they don't get enough of it at home. During the next three months we, the volunteers, tried to distribute our attention and our compassion as equally as possible to all the 35 kids. Some of them allowed us to come very near to them and trusted us with their problems. Others kept the wall around them often high and it was a struggle to reach to them and to gain their trust. Unfortunately, we found out soon that every child has his own tragic destiny to cope with and that every misbehavior has often sad reasons behind it. Most of the kids already lost one or sometimes both parents, others have to fear for their parents' life every day because of sickness. Often encountered is the habit of the parents to leave their children with grandparents or relatives and to go to other regions of the country, where they can find work. Really sad is, if the children are left behind alone and without food. Also to be mentioned is that the kids are between 7 and 14 years old. At this young age most of them have already seen and suffered more, than they should bear in their whole life.

Knowing all this things, it is hard to get upset with the children if they mess something up. But it's also important for the kids to see, that every action has consequences, it doesn't matter if good or bad. If they accomplished something, then it's good to compliment them and to let them know how proud you are. The hard part comes if they intentionally cross limits and if they don't

want to obey the rules. The first action is to talk to them, to warn them and to hope for insight. If that doesn't work, then it's normally helpful to threaten to speak with Marianne about it. The worst case for the kids and for me was, to suspend or even to dismiss them from the project because of misbehavior. This last option is hard to conciliate with my/our conscience but our job is to help as many kids as possible, and if someone doesn't appreciate this help, then it is just fair to give this opportunity to someone else. It was also a difficult task for Marianne to fulfill this kind of punishments. She is the only constant person in the project and she is the only authority that the kids respect. The volunteers have to earn the respect and this takes a lot of time. When it finally happens, then the three months are over, the volunteers have to leave and with the new ones the whole struggle starts from the beginning. Unfortunately Marianne has a big load of administrative duties to take care of every day, so that it is impossible for her to accompany the volunteers to the center. For this reason, it would be helpful for the kids as well as for the volunteers if a reliable person would be permanently involved in the project. More support from the board members of the project would also be welcomed.

A very positive aspect of the project is that the volunteers have the opportunity and the freedom to organize the time with the children as they wish, of course following the directives of Marianne. One of the most important customs is to strictly maintain the one hour study time after the meal. As sweet and loveable as the kids might be, they have the same habits like kids all over the world. They bring up all possible excuses in order to avoid doing homework and it is often a struggle to convince them that it's in their own interest to do it. We often couldn't help wondering, what the teachers do in classes instead of teaching, why some children passed the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and still can't count or read the letters and how is it possible that the teachers still beat the children in school and no one can stop them. For most of these questions I still don't have an answer.

The organization of the free time after homework is a pleasure for the kids as well as for the volunteers. A lot of planning and assertiveness is required, but most proposals are accepted with enthusiasm by the children. The highlights of our time here were the karaoke-dance show/parents evening, the games competition and the walks to the river. Most of the kids are very gifted in needlework or in handiwork and they have a great time painting with water colors. Also popular are the ball games. Unfortunately their capability of taking care of things is reduced.

That's why the lifespan of a ball is often not longer than a week. It is disappointing when belongings of the center just disappear, but one of the saddest moments was, to find out, that on a weekend food supplies for a whole month had been stolen.

We had to learn soon, that in Namibia things have their own rhythm and that time flows differently than in Europe. The habit of the volunteers of trying to solve every problem as fast as possible is soon cured and while this might cause frustration in the beginning, after three months either accommodation or deeper insight step in.

The entire struggle and the worries disappear the moment the little kids wait for us smiling and shining in front of the classroom and offer their help in carrying the heavy bags, when they fall into our arms longing for security, when they shout with all their power the songs that we teach them or when they pray together for the food that they get. These are the memories that should and will remain in our hearts. And although it is important not to overlook the problems the children deal with, every volunteer that attends such a project should keep in mind that he can't save and can't heal the whole world. It is not even possible to solve all the difficulties that our kids deal with daily, but as long as every volunteer tries his best, small changes can be done. Being able to rejoice in all the small successes is helpful in order to enjoy the free time in the evenings or on weekends.

With a good car or with adventurous colleagues it is a pleasure to discover all the highlights Namibia has to offer. It is worth spending money on trips and on activities but unfortunately they are often more expensive than the ordinary student can afford. Good English knowledge and a big appetite for exotic meat and sugar will make every volunteer's life very easy at the UNCSO.

The three months in Usakos were a lesson of being thankful for the things we normally take for granted in life. The load of memories is large and saying goodbye to the small and big friends I won in this short time is heartbreaking. But with all this in mind I can sincerely say that it was a great decision to come to UNCSO and that this is an activity worth investing time and love in.

Thanks to the Izaaks family for allowing us to bust into their lives, for the dedication that they take care of the volunteers with and for giving us the opportunity to work with the wonderful UNCSO kids!