

Mark Reeves testimonial for CART and SISONKE

My name is Mark Reeves and I recently returned from spending three weeks at CART and Sisonke school with my 17-year old daughter. We found out about the project from a leaflet that a former volunteer had created and distributed around some local bars and restaurants in south west London where we live.

We spent 1 week at Sisonke School (in Port St Johns town) and 2 weeks at CART in Sicambeni village, half an hour drive from town. Port St Johns is great – a little town but a great vibe and lots to do in the area. The CART and Sisonke staff are very good at making sure that volunteers get around to see the local area and have great things to do at the weekends.

At Sisonke school my daughter quickly found her niche working with the year 1 children, helping in lessons, playing games and so on. I joined up with the teacher of the year 4/5 children, contributing to his lessons on social science and at first helping with and then leading English lessons each day.

Transferring to CART one week later on a very wet Saturday came at first as a bit of a culture shock – the living conditions are very basic – a simple round hut with a grass roof just a bed and a table inside, a shower block that you might find on a cheap campsite and the whole place looking a bit muddy and messy.

The biggest surprise, however, was how quickly we adapted! Within just a couple of days none of this felt like discomfort – it became “normal”. In fact more than normal – I came to love the life of simple pleasures without reliance on the supposed luxuries that I have in my life in London. The founders Di and Luke, other volunteers and the local people who are involved with CART are wonderful and the place quickly felt like home.

Most of my life I have worked in desk jobs and I am currently a senior manager in a charity in England. Not much in the way of skills to contribute – or so I thought. But I quickly found things to do amongst the work that was needed. I designed and built a path using natural materials to avoid the need to wade through mud when it rains, helped to improve the stock control and finance systems in the shop that is run by HIV+ women and then Rachel (one of the other volunteers) and I built a wall to upgrade the “volunteer village”.

I couldn't lay bricks before I went to CART so we asked Chase (one of the local guys who works at CART) to teach us. Chase kept an eye on us, the wall was good, we learned new skills and Chase learned that he could teach bricklaying.

Believing that you may not have relevant skills is no reason not to go to CART. The project is all about skills sharing in both directions between volunteers and local people. If you are motivated to contribute there will be something valuable for you to do!

As with many things in life, the more you put in, the more you will get out of the experience. If you like to work on your own initiative, discussing your ideas with others and then implementing them, bringing your own energy and enthusiasm to your work, then you will really enjoy your time at CART.

I loved every minute and it is one of the best things I have ever done!