

South Africa Outreach 2015 – James Fulton

I volunteered for the South Africa Project in 2015, in the summer between my second and third year at Chad's. Before I went to South Africa I was nervous about it. I was incredibly eager to go and excited about the trip, but still nervous. I had experience tutoring before and had taught small groups of people at festivals by volunteering with the IoP's Physics in the field events. However, I had a sense of the difficulties of teaching in such a foreign environment, and not much sense of what I was getting myself into. Even when we first arrived in Grahamstown, we still did not know what subjects we would be teaching.

Grahamstown is a town in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. It has a centre which isn't unlike any town you would expect to find in the UK. The difference is the outskirts. Pushed up against the centre of Grahamstown are the townships of Joza and Fingo. You can see them from the centre of town but they are a world away. South Africa, despite the end of apartheid, is still very unbalanced in its wealth. Joza and Fingo are the poor districts and are predominantly the homes of the town's black and coloured citizens. Ntsika High school, in Joza, is where our years' cohort taught.

Despite not teaching at St Andrew's College itself, we found accommodation in their staff housing near the centre of town, (although we did become heavily involved with their outreach project aimed at local disadvantaged primary schools). During the first week, we had inductions and we met Chad's contact in South Africa, Tim Bernard. He is one of the most straight forward, honest and kind people I have met. The previous year's volunteers had made him out to be almost a legendary figure. We weren't let down. Tim and his family really embraced us coming over, and we built up a fantastic rapport with them. During this first week, we got settled and attended classes on the cultural history of the region and a crash course in the language, isiXhosa. Our pronunciation turned out to be a great source of comedy in the first few classes when we tried to introduce ourselves, but teaching, by law, is in English.

On our first day at school, we arrived before the break of dawn, and we still didn't know what we would be teaching. I got the impression that Ntsika High School had trouble with stasis. They couldn't tell us what we would be teaching because they couldn't predict what they would need when we arrived. It became clear that they required maths and English teachers, so that is what we became. Between three of us Chadsians, we led three maths classes and an English remedial class. I had studied maths at A-level and was studying physics at Durham, but the others hadn't studied maths since GCSE. Despite this we all led maths classes and the others led their English class. Many of the kids showed a lot of potential, demolishing the problems we set in class time. They were incredibly bright and we wanted to give them more opportunity to learn so we set up an after-school maths class, for homework help, and for extra maths challenges.

This is one of the qualities we brought to the trip. We brought enthusiasm and initiative; we acted as extra hands, leading our own classes; we acted as foreign curiosities. The chance for the students to meet people from different backgrounds is very limited. Ourselves and our students would go back and forth asking questions about each other's cultures and country. The most memorable thing I was asked was, from a primary school girl, about our largely powerless monarchy. She asked what the Queen would do if she saw someone committing a crime in the street. I had no idea.

We taught mainly grades 8 and 9 at Ntsika, and at that age the pupils are very well behaved. You don't have to struggle to maintain the attention of the class. However, in the older years it was sometimes a little more difficult. In the township schools, not everyone in each class is the same age. It depends on the age at which you started school and whether you passed every grade the first time

on your way through the system. In some grades you may find that a few of the boys, are men. They have been through their coming-of-age ceremony, and are considered, and treated, as adults. This makes teaching a little more tricky but all-in-all the students value education highly.

In our spare time, we planned lessons, we spent times on the St Andrews campus, we spent time with Tim and his family, we read South African literature, we met with academics at Rhodes University, saw student plays, and we explored Grahamstown. The town has botanic gardens, some bars and pubs (including a few student ones) and some surrounding hills. We explored these all. One weekend we took the 14hr overnight bus to Cape Town to explore the tourist sites there. On other weekends we went to a safari park and went twice to the beach. There is plenty to do if you look around.

I really enjoyed my time in Grahamstown and was heartbroken to leave Ntsika. I wish we had more time to give them, and the other volunteers felt the same. I am so thankful to have had the opportunity, it was incredible. Thanks to Tim; thanks to the Principal of Ntsika, Madeleine; thanks to all the other inspiration people and students we met there; thanks to the ideas and experiences we were exposed to; and thanks to the other volunteers. I learned a lot on the trip; about the culture; about the UK's history with South Africa; about apartheid and post-apartheid; about our privilege; about empowerment, and our own place within that. We were very aware of the line between our project and the world of voluntourism, and we wished to maintain that boundary. We tried to have good relations with the students, and knew that what we were doing could only make a small difference to few people. A little difference but still worthwhile.