

GONE FISHING IMMERSION PROGRAM AND ALUMNI

Reflection from: Ms Julie and Mr Ben Allen

Twice a year, a small group of diverse professionals from around Australia are challenged to experience the Gone Fishing Immersion program in Nairobi, Kenya.

An awakening

While we had been warned, there is simply no life experience preceding that can prepare you for the challenges and growth that this program provides.

We flew half way around our world, just to walk with the beautiful people of Nairobi who try and survive in some of the worst living conditions on earth.

To be honest, the purpose of the trip was a little undefined before we left, other than a genuine intent to try and help some people in desperate need. But the deeper purpose of the program revealed itself the more we ventured into the slums and the homes of some of the 2 million people that live in Kibera and surrounding slums.

This experience was one of extreme sensorial bombardment and even more uncomfortable internal reflection. Whilst we did indeed directly lend a hand during our time in the ERFA projects, the truth is that we were the ones that were uplifted and supported by the people of Nairobi. This humble community of people, opened up their lives and hearts unconditionally to educate each participant about the reality of their world.

Their selflessness, humility and honesty were both heart breaking and eye opening.

So, on reflection, the real purpose of our visit was to create an awakening. We saw with our own eyes what was previously unimaginable and incomprehensible. We were challenged to understand compassion and hope in a new light and to question our thoughts about equality and justice and all in our own backyard.

The grit of the slums tended to sand back the plaque of indifference that can build up over our hearts after years of living a comfortable and modern lifestyle.

The beacons of hope

As each of us traversed the escarpment, landscape, and destitution of the Kibera, Mukura and Embulbul slums, it was obvious that the beacons of light came from two main sources; the hope and support provided by the ERFA projects and the beautiful and inspiring children.

The positive impact of the ERFA initiatives and projects in these communities cannot be over stated. From the humble but inspiring Mary Rice Centre for the most neglected and yet loved children with disabilities in Kibera, to the more sophisticated integrated models of the oasis of the Ruben Centre or Brother Beausang school. It's hard to imagine what life in these communities would be like without these beacons of hope making a difference every single day.

The other source of light and hope emanated from the children of the slums. As we traversed the labyrinth of their neighbourhood, it was the children who constantly pulled us from our constant personal struggles with their delightful greetings or enthusiasm to rush and hold your hand or give you a hug. They brought our focus to their attention. Their presence and energy drew our thoughts to think about the future – their future and what it would look like without the help of organisations such as ERFA and the individuals that they introduce.

The children constantly humbled us with their irrepressible spirit, sense of fun, hope and resilience.

The outcomes. . . beautiful friendships

When it was time to reluctantly walk away, we did so without turning our backs. Our heads and hearts were so filled to the brim with the love of people who had literally nothing to give but a smile and the touch of hands.

Partnership Reports and Initiatives

Their souls, in turn, were rightly filled with the belief that we were there to tell the world about their stories, struggles and plights and that in doing so, we could make a difference.

Although this was an outstanding outcome, there was another personal gain. We unexpectedly, also took away some of the most cherished and beautiful friendships of our lives.

In ten short and powerful days, we had formed deep and lifelong friendships with each of our fellow Gone Fishing participants and wonderful leaders. The 10 strangers who had come together into the slums of Nairobi shared intense moments where words were inadequate and hearts were broken. We learnt to lean heavily on each other, each day and shared whole-hearted tears and laughter in equal measure.

A new understanding

The Gone Fishing program made us question, our preconceptions, ideology, beliefs and faith.

Looking out over Kibera on the last day, we were still wondering how a loving and all powerful God could allow his people, in our lifetime, to live like this? The answer to this quiet prayer came back to us, instantly and clearly. Why ask God, when we should ask ourselves instead? How could we, loving and educated people allow others to live like this, when we have the power to work together to at least change some of it. One community, one family, one little hopeful hand at a time.

Naively we had ventured, but by walking side by side with the people of Nairobi, our senses and souls were awakened and subsequently our lives, hearts and focus were forever changed... this is the essence of the Gone Fishing Leadership Immersion.