

My volunteering experience in Colombia

I had the mentality that all Colombians were drug dealers after watching the movie NARCOS but all that changed after volunteering in Colombia for six weeks.

Since I was doing a Bachelor's degree in librarianship, I decided to volunteer as a librarian and art teacher at Kyusa Uganda for two years. Initially volunteering abroad was not my interest but I had heard a lot of interesting volunteering stories from my friends who had earlier volunteered abroad through the ICYE programme and that's how I chose to volunteer in Colombia for six weeks through ICYE .

My journey from Uganda to Colombia started when I boarded an airplane at Entebbe airport, it was my first time to travel by air and I was so excited. I landed in Bogota on a chilly Sunday and everything appeared new to me, all sign-posts where in Spanish. Like any other person, I only knew Colombia for drug trafficking, music, famous personalities like Shakira and Pablo Escobar.

Shortly after landing, I was warmly welcomed and received by my host family, I was fortunate that these people could speak some English although they were fluent in Spanish, they took me to Medellin where there home was to stay with them.

According to statistics, Medellin is the most polluted city in Colombia with high prostitution levels, drug related crimes, poverty and youth unemployment .Having knowledge about the city's major problems, I decided to collaborate with the local counsellors to generate solutions to solve some of these problems. Together with local counsellors, we sensitized locals about dangers of polluting the environment and drug abuse and at every end of the session, I taught the youth how to make crafts from pollutants especially usage of plastic bottles for art and construction materials instead of burning them which pollutes the city, this was to be a source of income to the youth and also reduce on unemployment and crime.

Jointly with local counsellors ,we managed to convince locals addicted to drugs to go for rehabilitation. I also taught locals how to locate and retrieve information materials from libraries and internet using my skills in Librarianship, this would solve their information needs. I also taught locals the Ugandan culture, the preparation of matooke and groundnuts ,a Ugandan local dish. Since communication was essential, I taught the locals some basic English as they taught me some Spanish .

I also attended the biggest cultural festival in Colombia "The Barranquilla's Carnival" were I learnt more about Colombia's way of life like their music, traditional dress codes, their tasty foods especially Bandeja and Chorizo which was delicious. I also enjoyed their dances like Poro and Salsa Choke, they were so entertaining.

By the end of the six weeks, I had made many new friends including my host family. I also had the mentality that all Colombians sell drugs but I later realised majority of Colombians earn a living by doing black collar jobs without selling drugs an option despite the poverty. My voluntary work transformed many livelihoods of youth in Colombia and thus making me better person today. Thanks to ICYE that made all this possible.