

Field Report – Lena Birner, Term 3 2015 (01.09.15 – 25.11.15)

I worked as a volunteer in the third term in 2015 at UNCSO. I always wanted to do social work with children after school and when a friend told me about UNCSO, I thought that I found the perfect project. In the end I can say that the work at the center for these three months really was an amazing experience for me and changed my life. Before going to Namibia I was afraid that I am not schooled enough for the project or that I will have trouble bonding with the kids. Also when Marianne told us about the work we must do there, always having worksheets for the kids in study time and planning activities for every day, furthermore planning the Christmas play, I was afraid that I will struggle. But as soon as I was in the center and met all the children I realized that all my fears were unnecessary and how much fun it is working there. The children all greet you without hesitation and immediately make you feel welcome. On my first day at the center the children welcomed me and the other volunteers with plenty of songs that they were singing as a group together. The lively and catchy songs will probably still be in my ear when I am in Germany and now when the kids are singing them, I can often join them.



The work in the center was as well very pleasant. I like the combination of studying and playing time you have with the kids, because playing and having fun was for me as important as learning for school and teaching them discipline. Both, study and activity time, took place in one hour and it was a nice rest to do activities after you had to concentrate a lot in study time. In addition, I liked the work time we had. We always arrived at twelve at noontime and left at four in the afternoon, which I thought was a good time to work and also have enough rest time to do worksheets or just relax. In the center I always had a lot of fun with the kids and it gave me joy seeing them smile or playing with me.

The work could be still exhausting, especially when the kids won't listen to you or when you have the feeling that during study time you do not achieve as much with a kid as you expected. But every time a kid smiles because of you or comes and wants to play with you, you forget this feeling. But then again trying to find the balance between being strict and an authority and being the friend who plays with them was difficult, since most of the kids start to see you only as a friend and not as an authority they will listen to. Sometimes I came home and was just completely tired and exhausted from the day and the kids. But then the next morning I was always motivated to come back to the center.

The main reason for this motivation was obviously the kids. Now after almost three month at the center I realize that every child made a different impact on me. I started loving every kid for his or her own little habits and different personalities. With one kid I always played, while with the other I just cuddled and then the next one I was often ranting with, but they all made me feel happy and I think I gave them a good time. I know that when I will be back in Germany, I will even miss the times a kid made me go crazy because of its behavior as much as I will miss playing with the kids. Therefore it is important to not only bond with your kids from study time, but to search the contact with the other kids, since they all will give you something on your way that will always stay with you.

Especially when you notice how happy you can make the kids when they feel appreciated by you. Even for the ones that I thought would not care so much about this, it is important to make them feel appreciated by you. As much as I love the kids, as much as I was shocked to see or know under which circumstances the children live. It is hard to know that some kids only get food in the center or to know that they do not have their parents anymore and miss them. When I then saw them smile every day, I realized how strong the kids in the center are and how important a smile can be.

Another important thing that made me enjoy my time here so much, are my fellow volunteers. I am very happy that my group was so easy going, or as Marianne likes to call us "simple". To do good work, it is necessary that the group works well together and that no one tries to have his own way of doing something. At the beginning we immediately connected and supported each other with the work. I think that teamwork is a key factor to make the project a success and I am glad that all the girls were so nice to work and live with. Especially as a person who never lived with more people in a house, I was surprised how much I enjoyed living with the volunteers, Marianne and her husband together. Now I cannot imagine going back and suddenly have so much time on my own. Of course the good connection to Marianne and her family is just as much as important as the ones to the other volunteers and I want to thank her for taking all the volunteers each term into her house and having to keep up with all of us. The nice and often funny atmosphere at home and at work made the project a successful experience.

The living condition of us volunteers is, since we live with Marianne, very nice. The house is big enough to get some private time for oneself and when we wanted to, we could all sit together in the sitting room and laugh together. Like Marianne told us, I learned sharing during the time I lived in the house, since the volunteers always cooked together, shared a bathroom and had to be thoughtful with their room neighbor. Though all of this was a very nice living situation, it was weird having all of this and knowing that the kids have to go home to their shed in the township where they have a completely different life style than you have. When I thought about this I appreciated even more what I have here in Namibia and at home.

A reason why I liked the project is that working with Marianne as the project leader you have a person that actually is from Namibia and knows the culture and the people. She knew the kids so well that she could tell for each kid how and why he/she behaves like this right now and often she even had good contact to the families of the children. This way I did not have the feeling that the project does not interfere good with the kids, as it can be possible with organizations that are not led by people who actually live in Namibia or the state and see the problems of the family every day. It also gave us the possibility to do house visits at the children's places. During that time we could enter the houses of the kids and talk with their parents or other family members. The experience helped me to understand the situation of the kids better and why they are acting like they do in the center. Then again it was really shocking to see some situations the kids live in.

Nice changes from the work were the trips we did on the weekend. They made it possible for me to see a lot of the country. For trips like Etosha National Park or Sossusvlei we got a Friday off and for other trips like Swakopmund, Spitzkoppe, the Bushmen, Walvis Bay or Waterberg the weekend was more than enough. To see the beautiful nature and diverse animals made the trips always a fun time and I was happy to have the possibility to see the country and get in touch with the Namibian people.

In the end I would recommend this project to everyone. The only thing that I would suggest is that you come for at least the three months of a term. I know that not everyone has this much time and

therefore only comes for six weeks, but I think that this makes it harder for the people who stay longer and the children who already meet so many new people each term. Besides the people who stay shorter can either not see the projects and the family event, in this term the Christmas play, or they cannot be part right from the start. Now that my term is coming to the end, I am already really sad about the fact that I have to leave and three months seem now like a really short time. I cannot imagine not seeing the kids and the other volunteers every day and I will never forget my awesome time I had here.

A big thank you to UNCSO, Marianne and the children for giving me the chance to work at the center and for the great experience I had.

