

Cambridge Careers Case Study: Giselle, Vounteer, Unipal.

Giselle Overy, King's College, shares her experience of volunteering after graduating from her Classics degree.

For three weeks this summer, I was fortunate enough to volunteer with Unipal, a small organization that has been running summer activity camps and English language programmes in Palestine since 1972. I first found out about Unipal through a friend who volunteered with it in 2019 and advertised it on our college Facebook page. To apply, I submitted an application form which included my motivations for applying, and then I had an informal interview with a previous volunteer, who also told me about her experience. In this blog, I will focus upon my first two weeks in the region, when I and another volunteer organised arts and crafts activities at a boys' school just outside Jerusalem.

On most days, we had breakfast with the kids before running the activities, overseeing games (duck duck goose was a clear favourite!) and reading storybooks. On a few days, we also oversaw the kids as they played computer games or swam in the school paddling pool. In the late afternoons, we returned to our accommodation to plan activities for the next day, and to buy resources at the local craft shop if need be. We normally chose a theme for each day's activities, such as 'under the sea' and 'dinosaurs,' and the children's creations ranged from paper plate fish to honeycomb-paper monsters.

We always began by demonstrating the arts and craft processes to the group, so that they had example creations for guidance. Whilst we normally moved around the group to help any child when need be, one of us sometimes helped individual children, particularly if they had learning difficulties.

Two weeks provided enough time in which to form meaningful friendships with the kids, who were between six and twelve years old. Given that it was the summer holidays, most of the children still at school were orphans, so the school was their only home. Many of them had had very difficult childhoods before joining the school. I was particularly saddened to hear that one child had been found on the streets, and that the Palestinian equivalent of social services advised against the school admitting him, judging him to be a 'problem child.' However, it was heartwarming to hear staff describe his development, and for him to say that he was very content to be at the school.

I had anticipated a formidable language barrier, as neither I nor the other volunteer spoke Arabic. Fortunately, there were staff available to translate our explanations of different activities. Although they did not always translate during story time, we strove to focus on the story book pictures, always pointing out the characters, imitating character animal sounds, acting out the plot, and so on. I like to think that our varied activities engaged the children and provided creative, hands-on stimulation outside of their term time. I myself am lucky to have many childhood memories of doing arts and crafts, so I personally appreciated their value for childhood development.

I am grateful to have helped Palestinian children directly, to have witnessed their genuine happiness whilst doing arts and crafts, and to have learnt about the wider Palestinian community. I continued to do so after I finished volunteering, when I spent a few days in Jerusalem and went on an 'alternative' tour of the city. As a recent Classics graduate, it was interesting to supplement my knowledge of Jerusalem's ancient history with that of its subsequent history and current context.

I remain struck by the strength of the Palestinian community and by how rich its culture is. One of my most striking memories is hearing the azan, or call to prayer, reverberating around hills at 4am in a large city. I learnt some Dabke (traditional Palestinian dance) and listened to much Palestinian music. I had these experiences towards the end of my volunteering, when I taught, and assisted the teaching of, English to school children in the central West Bank. I was mainly motivated by my gratitude for my own education, the desire to use my skills and enthusiasm to 'give back,' but to children with fewer opportunities to learn English. As well as teaching new vocabulary, I utilized art and craft activities in the lessons, to add variety and allow the children to employ their new-found English knowledge in creative ways. For instance, the students created cartoon strips of their daily routines, and drew themselves in different outfits, then describing in English what they were wearing.

Although I eventually want to pursue a career in the civil service, my volunteering provided useful skills for my current position as an au pair, mainly by helping me understand how to engage with children. It greatly broadened my world perspective too, thus I would thoroughly recommend volunteering with Unipal – it was certainly an experience that I will always remember fondly and be grateful for.

<http://www.unipal.org.uk/>

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