



*Helping Others  
To Help Themselves*

## **Being a Children's Home & CBR Volunteer**

When I first considered volunteering abroad I was sure about a few things. I knew I wanted to be as effective with my time as possible, and I wanted to spend much of this time working with individuals with disabilities. It was these priorities that led to me to choose Volunteer Services Nepal (VSN) and ultimately the life changing individuals that I was introduced to during my first VSN volunteership in 2011. VSN has a number of equally unique and amazing volunteer placements, and I was fortunate enough to experience two of them. My assigned placement was the Nepal Disabled Women Society/Community Based Rehabilitation (NDWS/ CBR), a center for people with disabilities. Yet, I also spent a significant amount of time at the Brighter Futures Children's Home (BFCH) because CBR does not have class on weekends and my host family's proximity to BFCH. I would spend weekends, early weekday mornings and evenings at BFCH, and I would be at CBR during the weekdays.

Undoubtedly, traveling to a new country and deeply immersing oneself in its customs and culture is overwhelming for even the most fervent globetrotters. Kathmandu, Nepal is no exception. The instant I caught my first glimpse of the sprawling capital beneath the airplane wing, every expectation I made to prepare myself was consumed by the zooming motorbikes and bustling street vendors below. The stark contrast between Thamel and the surrounding villages pleasantly exaggerated the peace and serenity I experienced the day I arrived in Bistachhap to meet my Nepali host family. After a warm "Namaste Didi" from every one of the children at BFCH, they and Sita Didi returned to their daily work as if I was not there. I remember thinking to myself, "Do they really need me? They all seem so capable!" I reminded myself that an open mind and fewer expectations would grant me the most enjoyment. A few of the more extroverted children asked me a couple of questions each, but I could tell it would take some initiative to enter into their lives.

After letting go of the preconception that I was there to play nanny, I instead matched the children's often hidden, yet strong desire to connect and learn. On weekends, there was a large amount of free time. I found this to be the best time to engage the children in fun and productive activities. Some days Raju, Krishna, and Cheena would be home while the other children were at school. The three seemed to enjoy sitting and doing absolutely nothing in different areas of BFCH. I also noticed they would repeat already accomplished chores a few times, which at first I thought I should not disturb. I found it quite easy to break the cycle and join them together if I came up with a simple activity, perhaps involving dance and/or music. Maybe I had to beg Raju 10 times to come dance with me if he was in a stubborn mood, but it was worth it. Once one of them started dancing and running around, they all would join! If not, I would maybe use a little creativity and lure them to come try some funny dance move I made up on the spot. I found it greatly rewarding to brighten their days with laughter, exercise, and fun. I made an effort to spend a little one on one time with each and everyone at BFCH even if I felt a little awkward approaching some of the children or Sita Didi at times. While the



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extroverts certainly commanded the most attention, I found as I got know each brother and sister, there was never an excuse for missing out on interaction. Of course, there were days when shyness or homework hindered engagement, but there was always a way to break through the barriers. Sometimes I had the children teach me what they were studying in school.

There were so many different ages and profoundly distinct levels of functioning represented amongst the group at CBR. At first, this disparity seemed a bit overwhelming; however, I was able to quickly shift gears while working with one student to the next. I was ready to match each student's level of functioning and did not hesitate to add challenges. If I could recommend one thing for any CBR volunteers, it would be to practice your nursery rhyme lip-singing. If you can exuberantly gesture your way through an hour of Nepali children's songs you've tackled your toughest obstacle at CBR. Don't worry about remembering them, after a day or two you will not be able to sing anything else! Jokes aside, the most valuable resources at CBR are the Didi's and your imagination. After singing is classroom work. This section of the day is the quietest. Each student will individually work on a project such as drawing, writing, coloring, shape matching or block building. Take advantage of this time to explore different methods of stimulation and engagement with each and every CBR attendee. While it's easy to pick favorites, getting to know each individual's strengths and weaknesses will give you an edge when it comes time to integrating smoothly into the daily routine. During Kajaa (snack time) hour you can rest your legs for the exercises and rambunctious circus of coordination drills that may follow. Immediately following Kajaa is the least structured part of the day and consequently a time for volunteers to shine! I found this was an excellent time to motivate the students to dance to a music playlist I created or to some Nepali music from the Didi's cell phones. I would burn off the previous night's Daal Bhaat by creating a dance scene for all of the students to join. A field trip outside is never a bad idea.

Additionally, the language barrier at first seemed overwhelming, but much of what the students need does not have to be expressed via language. I came to learn a lot of Nepali language, especially through the morning song session, and I tried my hardest to use my Nepali. However, it is not necessary to be able to communicate terribly well in Nepali. CBR will benefit most if you bring a positive outlook and loads of energy.

My time representing VSN reformatted the way I view volunteering. I used to think that I could measure the difference I made in homework finished and chores completed. I came to discover that being a part of the children's lives taught me that I could make the biggest difference by encouraging them to express their own individuality simply by expressing mine. I came to Nepal to give of myself, but I left with far more than what I came with. I came back to volunteer 2 years later in 2013 with even more initiative and ambition to enter into the children's lives. My advice to any new volunteers is to drop the expectations and just spend time getting to know the children. All of the placements have to function when we are not around, so we should be



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happy to know they can do so. Yet, please realize how much joy you can add to their lives if you bring a desire to share yourself with the children and the Didis.

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