



THE DHAKA PROJECT

FLORENCE'S FEEDBACK

Really hard to go

Really hard to go, really hard to say goodbye to Maria at the airport and to leave them also. By "non" chance I caught a bad cold just the day before leaving and I believe that it just gave me an excuse to feel so bad.....

I arrived in Dubai at 2am and at home at 3am but impossible to sleep. Happy to find my bed but too many things in my mind avoiding me to fall asleep. I knew that it will be difficult to come back here after this trip and I confirm ;-)) I guess the lack of sleep is also one of the reasons I am feeling so down.

I found in Maria a younger sister as we find in each other many similar things. But I can tell you that she has a fire burning inside her that I cannot explain. She is a caterpillar that nothing will stop. Why? Because she knows where she goes and she can see the kids in couple of years, graduating from University.

Maria is far from being perfect (thanks God ;-)) and she knows it. She does not need people telling her what she has to do or criticise the way she is doing things. She needs people around her to support her, understand her and share her joy and her fears, people who do things with her or show her that they also can achieve.

An entire Community has found dignity because of this young lady. The journey is just at the beginning and it's a long one but if you are ready.... welcome on board!

Florence.



THE DHAKA PROJECT

4th of January

Friday is our day off! When we woke up we decided to take some kids out.

We went to the restaurant 'Fridays' where the staff is really nice with the kids and on the first floor they have a playground.

You should have seen their face playing for the first time with a swing.

Then we had lunch and how funny to watch their face drink Coke for the first time. They DID NOT like it ;-))) not even French fries or ketchup... Can you imagine a kid in Europe or in Dubai or in America telling you...Beurkkkkk it's not good ;-)))

Followed by the first experience of an Ice Cream! Oh my god we were so scared that they could be sick in the van on our way back. They loved it!

Then we ended our trip on small boats. It was so beautiful and peaceful. Exactly what we needed to recharge our batteries ;-)

Florence.

3rd of January 2008

I woke up this morning tired and not feeling so well. Maria told me that it was normal.. Ok, so I will manage. Then I spent, I think, at least for the moment, the most crazy day in my life. I can tell you that there is a huge difference between dreaming to be a volunteer and being one.

We left the house with a list of tasks and especially the one to find fabric for the uniforms. Bad start! Just after leaving the house our rickshaw had a fight with another one and they started to punch each other. I told Jewel who was my "assistant" for the day to get out of the rickshaw and then we went by walk.



THE DHAKA PROJECT

We found a Tuk Tuk but it was not a good idea. The pollution is at a so high level that being in open air can make you sick easily especially if you already feel nauseous... We managed to get to the Sheraton where we had to meet Mourad and his cousin who had the task to bring us in the wholesale area of Dhaka.... We MUST find the best deals each time as 1 Dirham saved here (20 taka) makes a big difference.

As a first time here I felt struggling with our local contacts supposed to help us. On one hand we need them as we don't speak the language and we think that they will be helpful. BUT on the other hand, they make us waste a tremendous amount of time. We are not living here and each trip is a too short period of time so when they offer us to have a tea, a coffee or when they tell us to relax, to take it easy, I understand now why we can easily "burn a fuse".

Like that, I lost 2 precious hours as not knowing the city, our "business Guide" took us to some shops to show us samples that I did not need etc.... I really had to keep my self control as I believe it's a waste of energy to get upset even if... Arghhhhhh ;-)) Anyway! We changed the car and the driver and FINALLY we arrived in the wholesale area. Another shock. So crowded, so noisy and smelly and I will avoid telling you the symptoms of poverty and misery. Everything you could imagine (or not even) as handicaps, illness you will find here not even mentioning constant people begging for 1 taka or food from children to old ladies and men.

We entered the fabric market and spent 2 hours trying to find what we were looking for. Finally we found our fabric for the trousers but not the shirts. We close the deal, taking a sample, signing the sample, leaving a deposit and deciding to come back Saturday to pay the full amount and arrange the delivery. (we were ordering not less than 4000 yards). I realized it was already 2pm and we did not have lunch. I was ok but I could feel that the guy with us was starting to slow down and he told me he was already starving. Sorry guys but not time for lunch. Grab a snack if you want but I still have to find carpets and heaters for the nursery. We took the car and left the place. I was really happy at least to have found this fabric. On our way to the carpets, our guide received a call from the fabric shop. The sample he gave us could not be delivered but "don't worry we have the same quality" so no worries. Oh my god. I saw the red light and our guide told me that it's the reason why he signed the sample. Otherwise those guys would have delivered the other quality, just fooling us...

So we came back to the shop and the guy started to explain and show us on a small sample that it was the same quality. I asked him to show me the full roll of fabric and he



THE DHAKA PROJECT

did not want. Of course! On the big piece I could prove him the quality was not the same.... I looked around and found the one I wanted, I went there, took it myself and put it in front of him. "And you really think it's the same quality? You are fooling me". He was not even looking at me... I said ok, I take the new one but 10 Taka less than the previous one. He told me NO, same price... or 1 Taka less... You must be joking. I was so upset. As it was impossible to discuss, I asked to be refund of the deposit and we left.

I went through a kind of internal nervous break down as I have been thinking "what am I doing here?" How can people fool us when we are coming from the other part of the people to help them and their families. I will never be able to do it. It's not possible, it's too hard.

In the middle of this mess, I had to find in my mind something to help me to support it. And it became evident. The smile and the joy of the children. Yes, in all this shit and painful environment we just need to visualize their smile and it cheers you up.

After we left the market, our "guide" told us he had some family problems and he could not stay with us.... Of course, everybody is abandoning us, no one gives a s....! Thanks to Jewel. He saw how down I was and he told me. Don't worry Flo, we get the carpets then the heaters and we will go by taxi. We don't need anybody. YES! We can do it!!!

While reaching the other area, the phone rang..... the guy from the fabric shop.... Finally he found our quality and could deliver it Thursday.... Oh my god! it has been a ray of sun in my brain. Just like if I needed that to give me hope again. We ended our trip with our "shopping" and came back to the project. I was so exhausted and shocked by this hard day that I could not talk.

I only wanted to see Maria and ask her how she could manage those things. How she could keep going when it is so easy just to fly back to our luxury life in Dubai. I came home and sat on the bed. I just needed to take out of my brain the pain of the day and the negative emotions I was dealing with.

We had a talk and she told me she had the same "trick" when she was loosing face. Thinking of the kids! It made me feel better. Then a couple (the one waiting to a good level of English to move to Dubai as Maria found them a job) came with Rahim and Rahima. The sister and brother. We discussed for a while then the kids wanted to stay



THE DHAKA PROJECT

with us. That's part of our life. Sometimes kids come to our place and spend some time with us. They play, they dance, they watch cartoons and they sleep here. Two more kids joined us and Maria was right. It just changed my mood in 5 minutes. How can you stay moody when 3 kids are jumping on you, kissing you, hugging you. Look at Mehdi's and Rahima's smiles, look at their eyes!!!!!!
I went to bed less anxious especially when I saw them falling asleep so peacefully

2nd of January 2008

After a good night of sleep I woke up the first one in the guest house as I was impatient to see what Dhaka is looking like from our balcony in the day time.

The street around 8am started to be busy with colourful ladies and loud men passing in front of your building to go to work.

One of the Bangladeshi staff, a young lady arrived at our place to dress Maria with the sari they offered her yesterday. That's where you learn to be patient.... As we were ready to jump on our schedule with so many things to do in a so short period of time, we had to handle 90 minutes of girly dress up, make up, bindie etc... But tradition is tradition and Maria knew she had to do it.

When we left the house and started to cross the area, I realized the impact Maria has on the community. I started to hear "Maria, Maria, Maria.." kids calling her name and mothers saying hello etc... On our way to the school one young mother with her tiny baby (really tiny) stopped Maria and I really liked her attitude. The baby looked sick and Maria was annoyed and told the mother. "I told you 2 weeks ago to go to see our doctor, what are you waiting for". Then she explained that's it is often the case. We have a medical center for the community but they don't go.

While we were approaching the school we heard to voices of the kids getting louder and I found, on the playground, the entire school waiting for us, in line, facing the row of their teacher. Roxanna was holding the banner with Welcome Florence. If you could have seen the smile on their face when we arrived... They were wearing their blue uniform and sweaters. All of them looked groomed with nicely brushed and shiny hair. They were between 8 years and 12years old I guess.



THE DHAKA PROJECT

They started the ceremony with a very emotional statement that was reminding me my boy scout commitment. Hand on the heart, they committed to work hard, be a good citizen and be proud of being a Bangladeshi. Then they sang the national hymn before going back to their school followed by us.

On the last post of the year, I wrote a post showing 2 pictures. The people of the slums and some young students. In the first row you have this incredible little boy with a fantastic smile.

When the children ended the ceremony, I heard Maria calling someone in one of the line. She said loudly, Flo, look who is here, and she called the same boy from the picture. Oh my god, I don't know how but it was like we already knew each other. He came out of the line with a shy smile and just put his arms around me and hugged me. What an fantastic moment.

As I was the "VIP" today, the staff led me in the school to show me all the installations. As we arrived the kids were finishing their breakfast as we provide 2 meals per day. All our meals are checked by a nutritionist and you can feel that the kids are in good health. I visited the entire school, the classrooms, the canteen, the medical and dental center, the beauty salon and the sewing workshop.

My first impression? I will go next time for a manicure pedicure or hair wash and blow dry without any doubt!. Not sure about the dentist but it has nothing to do with the equipment but only with the fact that I have a phobia of dentist ;-)
We had to run as many things were waiting for us. On our way out of the school, couple of kids grabbed us for hugs and kisses... how can we refuse!
Next stop... the nursery. When we opened the door and found those 3 to 4 years old dressed in those bright colours clothes, they just started to scream of hapiness with their hands up. Oh my god! They just wanted kisses and kisses. We quicly moved to the next room as there is a big mattress and we had their favorite game. Me in the center and them jumping on me. What an adorable moment.
Then we moved to the younger nursery with the babies.... So cute... but they were more shy and honestly, a little bit frightened by my blond hair and bright eyes... it took a little bit longer for some of them to approach me but finally they adopted me ;-)

Last stop, the pre school, a nice playground outdoor under the shadow of beautiful trees. After the class. the parents were invited to



THE DHAKA PROJECT

come over for registration. A picture of each child with his parents is taken and kept in a file for our record.

After visiting this school I had my first designated task to achieve. Sort out some donations and especially the Eid boxes donated by schools in Dubai.

Once it was done, I came back home where Maria was waiting for me and Firoz with a big list of shopping to do. And I can tell you that after doing some shopping here it will change for ever your addiction at least for the word ;-)

We 'just' needed to find suppliers for all the books and stationary for the entire curriculum of 700 children for one year... and guess what? that's was not all... we also had to find suppliers for 3000 uniforms and sweaters. Easy for a frenchie who is coming to Bangladesh for the first time, does not speak the language and has no clue of the currency and if things are expensive or not!

But as I say, in life there is no problems, only solutions! and here it's not a system D but a system Z!

Let's go Firoz, we can do it!

We ended in a crazily crowded part of Dhaka (but I will realise later that all Dhaka is crazily crowded ;-). My god! on the same road without rules you have pedestrians, rickshaws, tuk tuk, motorbikes, cars, cows, horses, vans, buses, trucks etc....

We finally founded a book manufacturer who will be able to provide us with the full list of our requirements but at a really competitive price. When you work for a charity, the bargain is not a game any more. You know that each Dhaka saved will provide something more for the Community.

We could not find the uniforms' suppliers and with the traffic, it took us more than one hour to go back home.

We had a last "easy" small shopping to do before reaching the guest house (we thought). It was to find mopeds to clean the floor. That's when you realise how easy our life is out of Bangladesh. Everything is a challenge even finding daily goods.

01/02/2008

Happy New Year in Dhaka



THE DHAKA PROJECT

I believe the 1st day of the year 2008 will stay in my mind for ages. Finally I managed to get some days off from the office in Dubai but the decision has been made on the 31st at 3pm. Just the time to call Maria and to check when we could fly together. The night flight was fully booked so we decided to get the next one, at 1:15pm.

I almost forgot it was the New Year's Eve as I was thrilled to finally go to Dhaka. I have been heavily involved in the last week and even if I think I understood the philosophy and the strategy of the Project, I knew I had to go there, quickly in order to check if Dhaka and myself, we were clicking.

I spent midnight on the New Year's Eve with 2 friends, watching the amazing fireworks displayed in front of the Jumeirah hotels. While I was watching the 13 minutes unforgettable fire show, (bravo François ;-)) I could not stop imagine what was happening at the same time in Dhaka. The Project staff was organizing a party that we could not attend on time. I went to bed early, a little bit concern not to forget anything.

I went previously in the afternoon to do some special shopping. While people were loading their trolleys with food and last minute goods, mine was full of special order from Maria.... Diapers and sanitizer (hand wash liquid used without water).

So I came back home after the firework, not too late as I wanted to be "fresh" for our departure. Pfff I could not sleep before 3am, as I could not stop thinking about the Project.

Maria sent me a sms at 5am telling me just finished to pack and that we had to find 2 big taxis in order to load 6 huge boxes... Mmm first challenge of the year ;-)

I went early morning to this place in Dubai where Pakistani are renting their small trucks and services. We managed to pick up Maria and the boxes and went to the airport. As a flight attendant, she knows the tricks so we unload the colourful truck in place of the Limousines reserved for the Business Class and went inside with our 11 luggage.

Then came the first bad news... 120 kilos overweight...NOT ME! Our luggage... and Maria who told me when we left the storage room.. But we did not take anything!

Nothing to do to convince the Desk guy for Emirates. He was really nice but rules are rules and ladies I have to follow the rules... Ok, ok, I tried (not really convincing I admit) to ask a passenger to put at least 1 box on his ticket but he was going to London...

Thank you very much sir but...

We had to pay the extra luggage promising ourselves that we will need to find a way to avoid those kinds of problems.

After 4 hours of flight we arrived at the airport, getting very quickly organized in order to pass the custom in the first ones... then we managed to get the luggage without anything missing and in a good timing. No problem easier to pass the custom as a man



THE DHAKA PROJECT

helped us (we had 4 trolleys full) and when the officer stopped us the guy just said (that's what he told us ;-)) NGO, just old staff for the kids my friend et HOP! We went through.

There, what a surprise... around 10 kids were waiting for us with one part of the staff with banners and balloons painted in our names. I was amazed. The kids around 10 years old were wearing blue navy clothes like uniform. They were all saying together.. Welcome Florence... Welcome Maria!

Each one gave me their name (I will need more work to remember them) and I told them to call me FLO (It made them laugh a lot)

Then we jump in 2 minivans and went up to the project. Just crossing the area full of rickshaws and small shops and talls gave me an idea of the atmosphere. I liked also the smell with a mix a spices and smoke.

We reached our house, in the heart of the community. The Project has an apartment with 2 bedrooms. It's all painted in green (colour of hope ;-)) There is the girls bedroom and the boys bedroom. The kitchen has the basic and only necessary apparels and the cupboards are full of pasta, pasta and pasta...

The only thing missing but Firoz will fix it today, I have asked for a water heater. Too hard to only have cold showers... I believe ;-)

After having our pasta, we went to Mitu's house in the neighbourhood. Mitu is one of the teachers. Oh my god, she prepared a full dinner but we had to decline. How ashamed we were but we explained that it was not because of the food, but our system is not accustomed to the food. I would love to try their food but that's the best way, at least now to spend my stay in bed...

We came back home and could not stop chatting for 3 hours. In the same room, 2 European ladies and a Bangladeshi, we had so many things to share!

Good night .

Florence