

RAE HAULTAIN'S FEEDBACK

Diary of a volunteer..

I arrived in **Dhaka** feeling somewhat apprehensive but looking forward to the challenge ahead. I had left Dubai with personal problems of my own and needed to do something to put it all in perspective. What better way I thought then to help others in more strife than myself.

Little did I know how much it would change me completely.

I was met at the airport by **Maria** and her team who quickly came forward and took my luggage amid smiles and introductions. My hands were quickly grasped by small grubby hands belonging to those of a few of The Dhaka Project kids and off we went to grab a quick bite to eat before making our way to the guest house. This was to be my accommodation over the next week. It was not at all what I had expected. I had a small



sized apartment to myself consisting of 3 bedrooms, (*mine with a bathroom attached*) and a kitchen. There was a shower, clean sheets, and a little gas stove to make myself tea and even air conditioning in the bedroom.

Maria showed me where her rooms were upstairs as well as the extra guest rooms available on the floor above that.

That night the kids decided to stay by me so I was treated to them teaching me a few Bengali words and then singing away a selection of their favourite Bengali songs. Definitely something to lift the spirits.

The next day **Jewel**, the volunteer manager came to pick me up from my guest house where we made our way to **The Dhaka Project School** and offices.

From far away, the building appears rundown and shabby but once you get closer you see the many coloured handprints of children on the walls outside with descriptions of what they want to be when they grow up.

Inside I met all the office staff who were warm and friendly and was then given a

complete tour of the premises.

I thought to myself its truly amazing what they have achieved here in such a short space of time but the best was yet to come.

There were sewing and garment making classes for the adults (*parents of the children who went to school*) as well as a beauty parlour and hairdresser.

A computer class was set up for the kids that taught them basic computer skills as well as a library full of used books. On site they also had a small doctors office and dental clinic for the children and families and I met the doctor who only had a few seconds to stop and say hi as there was already a queue of people waiting to see him.

Before we left I ordered a few Fatua (*long sleeved tunic tops*) from the sewing department to wear whilst I was here and hopefully blend in a bit more with the locals.

The rest of the day I visited the nursery and primary schools and then the new **EK school** which was just finished a few months ago.

Wow!!! This place is great. What was originally just a shell of concrete walls and little else has now been transformed into 3 levels of classrooms with the 4th floor left wide open to be used for school assemblies, drama shows etc..

I made my way back to the office with Jewel for a bit before finally heading home to cook dinner, shower and crash out for the night.

Over the next few days I found myself immersed in what is essentially the 'true Dhaka'. First stop the **Korail slums** where I encountered such

devastating poverty it broke my heart. Children looking after children while parents try to find work. Limited rations of rice to eat and makeshift huts covered in rags, where 1 dirt floor room houses a whole family. The children however were wonderful and came running up for hugs and were more than happy to let me snap a few photos of them.



Next up was the Dhaka Medical centre (*if thats what you can call it*) where I found the conditions absolutely appalling! I went specifically to visit one of the lady's in the burns unit who had been sent there by the Dhaka project. She was 24 years old with 3rd degree burns from the waist down caused by a cooking fire. How helpless I felt when



staring at this sad young lady and the many other victims around her. No medicine, blankets or a doctor to be seen. I was told that food is provided by the visiting family members as well as medication but only if you could afford to pay for it which many of course couldn't. Most were covered in dirty bandages and some I found sleeping in the hallways waiting for available beds.

I stayed for a bit but in truth it was so hard to handle after seeing one young lady with half her face burnt off, I quickly made a hasty retreat. How much we take for granted I thought. Outside whilst the traffic

buzzed by and we sat in the tuk tuk on our way back to the project, I was unable to speak and sat sad in silence wondering at the state of such things..

After a quick break at my guest house I wandered back to the offices with a determination to do whatever I could to help in the short time I was there. I met Maria who was working away and sat down to discuss the jobs I could take on when she had to leave the next day. This lady never rests and is always looking for new ways to help the children, the families and new ideas to keep the staff motivated, happy and fulfilled. We sat at her place well into the night discussing what we could do and how to do it and I was constantly in awe of her dedication and commitment to the cause.

The next day **Jewel** and I set out to the **Westin Hotel** to lobby for more storage space and they were only too happy to oblige. After, we made our way to the embassies to get more volunteer support and donations but unfortunately they were all closed so after a quick bite to eat we went back to the offices and I got stuck into work.

My time to leave came too quickly when I had so much I still needed to do. It made me realise the massive task Maria and her team have undertaken and continue to do every day.

Before school was about to leave for the day, the principal **Mr Azad** called me quickly as he needed me for something. I went down the stairs to be greeted to by at least 50 smiling faces holding a big hand coloured poster saying '**Goodbye Dear Rae**'. They all started singing a Bengali song and while I listened to them, my eyes filled with tears at the warmth and love they had shown me whilst I was there.



The Dhaka Project is a resounding success and to be able to experience just a small part of it was truly something I will cherish forever.

But there is still so much to do, so many families to help and little lives to be saved and without the help of volunteers and donations then many will go unfed, unclothed and uneducated.

If reading this stirs just a small part of you, then reach out and lend a hand because even the smallest thing can make such a big difference!

A big thank you to the great team at the Dhaka Project who let me into their lives and treated me with such warm hospitality. You guys are doing an amazing job and I look forward to returning very soon!