

The call of Africa

Melanie Kutek

The SA Section of WEF welcomes Melanie to their section and is working with her to increase the possibility of her achieving some of her plans.

I have had an interest in Africa and African people for as long as I can remember. My first aim was to become a lawyer to assist in South Africa to break down apartheid. Once this was already done by Nelson Mandela, I then decided I would be a doctor, so that I could go to Africa and help the millions of sick people and communities over there. So after I finished school in 1999 I started studying a Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery at Adelaide University. After I'd been studying for two and a half years, I started to have doubts about why I was studying it and how useful it would really be, so I deferred for a while to make up my mind if it was what I wanted to continue with.

While that was on hold, I decided I would travel. I spent 4 months traveling in Japan, America, Portugal, Spain and my last 2 months was spent in southern Africa visiting South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique. During this time I came to the conclusion that working as a doctor in Africa, I would be very limited in the resources and facilities available to me in saving people's lives, and having trained in a country like Australia, and knowing the sorts of amazing medical accomplishments that can be made, it would be very frustrating watching helplessly as people died in Africa of things that could be easily cured. I decided that I could probably do just as much with the knowledge that I had gained in the first two and a half years of my degree, as was likely at the completion of it. As one doctor, there are only so many lives that can be saved, and there are a lot of people who are still suffering.

In February of this year, I returned to Adelaide having decided to start studying a Bachelor of Education (Junior Primary and Primary). I thought that being a teacher in Africa, I would have the potential to make a difference to a greater number of people. For example, if I inspire one child to go to University and study to be a doctor and she/he then returns to their community I will already have done as much as I could have done as one doctor. I also think it is a much more positive and inspiring way to help a community. My belief is that the only way to begin to create an equal and just world is by giving everyone equal opportunity for access to education. .

While studying, I decided that I wanted to become involved with the growing African community in Adelaide. I contacted Gilles Street Primary School which has a program for New Arrivals students and began working with a class that has six Sudanese students and students from various other countries. Through talking with these students I realized that there are very few opportunities for refugee and migrant children to get involved in the Adelaide community outside of going to school everyday.

Around this time, I also went to an information session on Sudan, and the issues that Sudanese refugees in Australia face. The session opened my eyes to the severity of the situation in Sudan and also to the lack of support that is available in the Adelaide community for refugees. This got

me thinking about different ways that I could help the newly arrived refugees settle into their new lives in Australia.

My first idea was to start a basketball group, as I have considerable experience in both coaching and playing this sport. I thought that in giving the children an opportunity to play basketball, it would get them involved with something physical, but also positive. It gives them an opportunity to gather off the streets and something to succeed at without being focused on academic achievement. Once the club is operational and the children have developed some skills, I hope to take teams of children out to play against other teams so that they can interact with other community groups within Adelaide.

Before the commencement of my basketball program, I received a phone call suggesting that I cancel the program due to escalating racial problems in the area. This highlighted another issue that I am concerned about in relation to refugees in Adelaide, and that is that most Adelaideans don't have an understanding of the reasons why people come to Australia as refugees. All they know is the biased view that the media portrays. I think that community education of the general Australian population is essential in developing a good relationship with refugees in Australia. To try and combat this issue, I am trying to set up an education program, in which refugees go to school assemblies and community groups and explain the situation that has led them to be in Australia. .

Finally, to take steps toward my eventual aim of working in Africa as a teacher, I am going to spend three months in my summer holidays teaching at a school in Kenya. In order to make the most of my visit, I have requested the assistance of a local Primary School, who is currently helping me in my endeavours to collect stationery and education resources to take to Kenya with me.

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