

What The Link has meant to me

Verity Smith, 2007

The Link gave me my first experience of living in a developing country. I went in 1985 with Roger Bates as a leader with the group of Venture Scouts from Leamington to work with a group of scouts from Bo re-roofing the Methodist school there. For me it fulfilled a lifetime ambition (since the age of 16) to do some work in Africa. It was so good to work with local young people on a joint project of their choosing, and we all learned a lot from the example of the local scouts about really hard work!

Immediately following on from that I applied to go on VSO. I found 5 half-completed application forms at home, but this OWL visit really decided me to complete the form with conviction! I was accepted to go as a VSO volunteer to go back to Sierra Leone 1986-8. I was to be involved in rural development work in Pendembu, further East than Bo. It was a very varied life, living in the village and getting to know so many of the local people in the various development projects. On my return to UK I raised over £600 for the VSO Small Projects Fund there.

I had gained so much from that time, but also felt that I needed more training in order to be more useful in future. So on my return I applied to Reading University to do a 1 year Masters Degree in Rural Social Development - which helped to give me the knowledge and contacts that I would need in future. My times in Sierra Leone were essential background to this. .

At the end of the course I was invited to stay on at that University Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development to help coordinate and also teach on their short courses for international students. I did this for 14 years. Occasionally I had Sierra Leonean students. The work included running and teaching on short courses overseas on behalf of both the University and sometimes the Department for International Development: in Thailand, S. Africa, Bangladesh, Laos, Nigeria and Kenya - wonderful (if very hard working!) experiences.

In fact I have lived in Reading ever since 1990 when I did the Masters course. For almost all that time I have been involved in running an International Students Welcome Club at the University - connected with my church here. I have made so many international friends, who may just be here for a year, but continue to e:mail afterwards and some come back for a further course or a conference years later.

I am now a University landlady and always have an international Higher Degree student as a lodger in my home. I really enjoy making them welcome and comfortable here and supporting them at the pressurised times of exams and finalising their Ph D thesis. I've had girls from Brazil, Italy, Peru and now China. A bonus is that they also get to know my father of 97 who lives in very sheltered accommodation nearby. He is the only one there to receive 'Happy Father's Day' cards from Brazil!

So you can see just how much has happened as a result of my involvement with One World Link. I appreciate the window on the world that it has given me, greater understanding of development issues, the chance to travel, have so many international friends and revel in the challenge and shared learning of teaching international groups of such interesting, experienced higher degree students.

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