

'Out Of Africa'

Michael Gallagher, a young man from Ynys Mon with learning disabilities has just spent a month volunteering in Lesotho. The opportunity came about through Mencap Cymru. Simon Stranks from Mencap Cymru supported Mike on the trip.

The purpose of the Lesotho volunteer project was to share skills and experiences with people in Lesotho. Wales and Lesotho are twinned countries, and so part of the project was to compare the experiences of disabled people in Lesotho, with people in Wales.

Dot's story - Mike's Mum

As often with life's opportunities they come out of the blue and you have to seize them. That is how Mike's African adventure came about. A chance chat at a Mencap meeting and he was hooked. That is how Mike has always been, always interested, always wanting to have a go, sometimes afraid but never enough to stop him.

School

Mike went off to school in the local village along with his nephew and niece who are the same age. He loved school and made many friends. He had dedicated support, this being the only thing different to all the other children. Mike worked hard and spoke Welsh and English.

He then went on to Secondary school and loved every minute. Education milestones were a



nightmare for me as Mike's dad died when he was 7 years old so these times always made me feel very alone. During my battles to keep Mike in mainstream school he would have every confidence he would just do what his friends would do. I had an even bigger battle to do a regular college course. Mike stayed in the Lower 6th while we went to appeal for him to stay in mainstream school. This allowed him to go to the prom in his tux and a limo (another of his ambitions).

When the sports department in

our local college met Mike they were so impressed with his haul of medals and the fact that he had been Ynys Mon's Disabled Sportsman of the year (twice) they offered him a place on an NVQ level one course. Mike did this in 2 years and as with everything he does, he made more friends and had a great time. As always Mike is a fantastic ambassador for learning disability. For Mike that's what it's all about - being involved, doing your best knowing that if you want to win medals for swimming & athletics then you have to put in the work.

Llais

Africa

When Mike said I am going to Africa to volunteer for Mencap for once I thought he may be disappointed, but as often happens he was right and I was wrong!! His interview was tough but he took it in his stride.

When he was there, Mike needed to make a presentation about his life in Wales and the sort of things he liked to do, this gave me a problem as it all sounded like showing off. Mike chose pictures of himself skiing, swimming with dolphins', kayaking, in New York for his 21st birthday ,sailing on the HMS Lord Nelson into France, I thought this was all too much for young people in Africa so I made him tone it down. As usual I was wrong and he was right. When he came home Wayne Crocker from Mencap Cymru told me how well Mike's presentation had gone down with parents who were being told their children could do nothing. Here was a young man who was bilingual showing them all the things he had done... he had raised their expectations in 15 minutes. This was a great eye opener for me.

While away Mike had done a 'blog' on the web of his trip and one of the first photos was him under a sign which said "people with mental handicap". Right away my phone started to ring with lots of his friends and family who were all very shocked I had to tell them this would not have been unusual here too long ago and that's what his trip was all about, showing another way, expecting more.

Mike's story - Volunteer

I just went to a Mencap meeting with mum one Saturday. Wayne Crocker said we want a volunteer to go to Africa. He said it would



be good and that I would not be on my own so I said ok.

It took a long time and I had to send a letter saying why I wanted to go so I did.

The letter said:

I would like to go with Mencap to Lesotho. I have things that will help people. I have done a sports course in Coleg Menai, I am doing a course of sports course that is a Community Sports Leader Award. Community sports finished a cooking course with Coleg Harlech.

I like to help people to be happy and I am happy.

My work experience was in a café and in a leisure centre with lots of children and others.

I help the children learn to swim. I have won gold medals for that in the Welsh games.

I like exciting days and this is very exciting and will be good for helping. And for playing football with some boys and girls. Football makes you get friends and so does cricket. You play and laugh.

I hope I can go to get to know new people.

Then I had to go to Portmerion and meet 4 other people and talk to them and do a presentation I

had done one before with the Down's group in Ireland, then I had to show them some things on the computer that was hard because it was not like mine but it was ok in the end. they asked me about my life and about Lesotho I had looked on google so I knew some things, like the weather and food and that Wales made friends with them and went there to talk to them.

It was a scary day but good. On the way home mum said I had done my best so that's all you can do. The next day Wayne called me and said I had passed, I told mum she was shocked. I was very happy. Then I went to Cardiff on my own to see who would come with me. We had to talk to people and go out we chose Simon. He is my mate and we had a good time. Then I had to do training about Aids and that was important.

Getting There

Soon it was time to go all my family hugged me and said take care. It was a very long time on the plane. Simon was nervous but I love flying. It was funny when we got there not like Wales or any of my holidays. We got to our little house and everyone was very nice. I did want my mum a bit but it got better. We had lots

Llais



of work to do and we had to meet lots of people.

At night it was very dark and colder than in the day we did not go out at night because there is no where to go. We went to places where children are looked after because Aids is very bad and families die. My job was to tell them about my life in Wales and all that I had done they liked that. We played football and ran around I made good friends. I showed them how I can cook and they liked my food. Wayne came for the last week and we went to Capetown.

Our last in the country we went to a reception with the Queen of Lesotho. The reception gave the Lesotho Society for Mentally Handicapped People the chance to show the Queen how they try and stop the abuse of young girls with a learning disability. The Queen was lovely. She shook my hand and asked me about my time in Lesotho.

We then we had some fun because Wayne said I had worked very hard. Time to go home it went so fast I had the best time

Simon's Story - Supporter, Mencap Cymru

On the 16th of February with snow still on the ground, Michael

Gallagher and myself went on an adventure to sunnier climates in sub-Saharan Africa. Michael was the person chosen to be the Lesotho Volunteer and I applied and was appointed to be his supporter for the trip.

Michael went to share his life as a disabled person in Wales, and I was there to give skills on advocacy and campaigning to disability groups in Lesotho.

Busy time

The flights were all on time and when we landed the sun was shining in Maseru, which is the capital of Lesotho. Our first day involved meeting with staff at the LSMHP (Lesotho Society for Mentally Handicapped People), with whom we were to do our work for the month that we were in Lesotho. Over the first week we spent a lot of time meeting various people who worked with LSMHP and seeing some of the countryside in Lesotho. Over the weeks that followed we saw more and more of the countryside and Michael got to give presentations on his life in Wales and also to answer questions people had about what life is like for disabled people in Wales. Michael did fantastically well in delivering his presentations and made a big impact on everyone he met.

Both Michael and I were

overwhelmed most by our visit to Phelisanong orphanage outside of Leribe. The orphanage is for young people who's parents have died from HIV/AIDS, many of the children there also have learning disabilities and physical impairments. The reason this had such an impact on us both was to see the vast differences in quality of life for disabled people in Lesotho when compared to Wales. All of the children were really pleased to see us and we had a lot of fun playing football, watching videos and going for a swim with them.

Have fun

We had a lot of fun on our trip, we got to go canoeing with the LSMHP youth group. This was a really fun activity, even though our boat nearly turned over! We also got to spend some time in South Africa seeing lots of different places and meeting lots of different people.

The end of our trip saw us going to Cape Town to have a bit of a wind down after all the work we had been doing in Lesotho. While in Cape Town we got to go up to the top of table mountain to see some amazing views and also go to Robben Island. This is the island where Nelson Mandela spent most of his prison sentence. It was very humbling to see the cell where he spent his time as it was very small and made both Michael and myself think about the difficulties that marginalized groups in society often have to face and endure.

Overall, both Michael and myself, got a lot out of the trip. We got to see what life for people in less advantaged countries is like. We also had an opportunity to share our skills with groups, which will hopefully, help them to make changes in their lives.