Shareen Teja

Published 10/1/2021 by Gerald Encabo

Bachelor of Child Development (BCD) student Shareen Teja completed her co-op placement at a children's education centre in Kampala, Uganda. Below she details the family connections which led her to Uganda and how the experience impacted her future career hopes.

Published: October 1, 2021

My professors in BCD asked me at the beginning of the program to start thinking about where I wanted to go for my co-op placement. I thought about it long and hard – researching places within Canada and internationally – and decided to go to Kampala, Uganda for four months. This was for a couple important reasons:

1. My mother is a refugee from Uganda. She was driven from the country under the regime of dictator Idi Amin. I would be going back to the place of the stories my mom used to tell me when I was young.
2. I had heard about the successful experiences of past ECE and BCD students who had completed their co-op placements in Uganda.

Given these reasons, I figured, "Why not take the chance?" After reassuring my parents, finalizing the necessary paperwork and arranging accommodation, my bags were packed and I was eagerly ready to go.

Before I headed to Uganda, I had the opportunity to attend my cousin's wedding in Kenya. I also decided to explore that country before heading to Uganda and settling down for my placement.

In the end, it was an opportunity of a lifetime. In Uganda, there are over 49 different tribes each having their own language. Plus, the students have to speak English in school, and speak Luganda and Swahili as well. I was able to experience the culture and the food, and live in a country which is still developing. During my placement, my role consisted of working with the staff on documentation and editing end-of-term reports based on the development of the children. I led activities such as art and cooking, as well worked as an administrator in the office. At the end of each term the school puts on show, and the theme this time around happened to be 'Dance'. Students from the Key Stages (Grades) 1-5 learned about the Runyege dance from the Batoro/Banyoro tribe. I was invited to take part and teach a dance from my 'tribe' so I ended up teaching the Nursery group ages 2 ½-5. They wanted to learn something different, and so I taught them a simple Bollywood dance that was easy enough for them to enjoy and perform. At the end of the term; the children performed and everyone including the parents thoroughly enjoyed the show! There were so many memorable days. I was also able to also spend my birthday with the students! They opened their arms with lots of love, happiness, and good times.

We made memories that I would never forget. This experience has impacted me in such a way that I now know what I want to do. I have always had an interest in travelling to developing countries and helping and this has shown me that I can do exactly that. Now, I want to do more of that after graduation.

But the human connection involved in this experience was crucial. I never really understood my mother's stories until I saw it for myself, and to this day, I still keep in touch with the friends I made.

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