

## Volunteering with AOM by Helen Denyer

**Volunteering with AOM has been an extremely fun and rewarding experience.**

Over the past four weeks in Madagascar I have been working with AOM as a volunteer and my task has been to teach English to around 20 adults (14+years old). The adults are mainly AOM school staff, the district assoc. and their family, and the older children from the orphanage. Many more would have liked to attend, but because of their jobs and the lack of space in the classroom, this was not possible.



The new volunteer house in Antsirabe is well equipped and has a classroom on the ground floor below the sleeping rooms.

All my students have been very enthusiastic and motivated to learn English and I have perceived thorough commitment (they have always done all their homework and shown great improvement, even though they have other jobs and their families to look after). I have noticed that there is a great lack of any English language skills throughout the country and thus believe that speaking the language will be a true advantage for many of my students, especially those seeking jobs.

I have been working with the children in both pre-schools that AOM supports here in Antsirabe, and although the children are still very shy (as they have not had much contact with foreigners) they are very welcoming and once you get to know them they are very curious and excited.



One of my favourite activities has been playing with them during their breaks and just seeing the smiles on their faces when they were truly involved in a game. This also makes for quick multi language skills

AOM has renovated a new school with bigger classrooms and supplied the schools with much needed water supply, as well as lunches.

The lunch is prepared with much care in a large kitchen at the volunteer house. The three individuals preparing the meal for 140 children work all morning and take high hygiene and safety precautions.

Furthermore, a water tap system has been created at both schools and the children are taught the importance of hand washing with it.



It seems funds could be used for decorating the schools and supplying balls and a seesaw and a swing for school playgrounds.

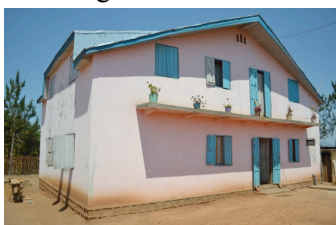
Student numbers at both schools have risen significantly and every day there is somebody ringing the doorbell of the volunteer house to ask for school supplies, subscription fees or to enrol their child in AOMs pre-schools. Thus funds are needed to provide more schools supplies and feed the increasing number of students at the pre-schools.

I have also spent some time at the ASA Orphanage AOM supports here. All the staff are very friendly and extremely hard working and will do anything to keep the children happy. However, here too, there is a lack of toys and even balloons were received with such great happiness, what would they do if they received a football or a basketball net?



However, a more pressing need is the repairing of the floors for the second level of this small house that is a home to 21 children. This would open a whole new area to live in.

The small balcony on this level is very nice, but there is no door to stop children from walking out onto it and no railing stopping them from falling off.



Because the stairs in the house are very narrow, steep and insecure for younger children and it would be very beneficial if new stairs could be built on the outside of the house (which would also save space).

Many children are squashed into one room at night and many sleep in one bed with three or four other children on the floor. Thus funds are much needed to provide the children with a beds and mattresses to sleep on.

A great idea has been to organise excursions with the children from the schools and the orphanage. I believe this could not only be fun for the children, but also educational. We went for a little walk to a river close by and the young children were so excited about leaving the yard of the orphanage! What next? Beach?

Another project AOM would like to start here is to help a community centre run by sisters.



The centre teaches young adults between the ages of 16 and 22 arts and crafts like sewing, knitting and embroidery. They work with people from poor backgrounds to supply them with skills to earn money. The course takes 18 months in which the first 6 are taken up by teaching them a range of skills and thereafter they can specialise into the one they enjoy most. The things they create are then sold on

the local market and sometimes even in Antananarivo. There are many teachers to support them and they too create things to sell.



Although the centre focuses on helping disadvantaged students, the students must pay a subscription fee. Many students are not able to pay this and cannot attend the training. At the moment they have around 45 students, but have the capacity to support many more.

The sisters take interest in these young adults and offer counselling if any problems arise and visit the student's homes and families. The sisters found that the students often only have one meal a day as they cannot afford to buy more food. AOM would like to supply the centre with funding to provide the students with lunch. They have already got a large kitchen and staff who could prepare the meal.

AOM would like to teach how to set up a micro business at this centre. For this a volunteer is needed with design, business and marketing experience, to teach the students, staff and others from the community the skills necessary so they may succeed. They would, for example, greatly benefit from a website to increase their sales – and to maybe also export some of their products. Micro loans would be made available to qualifying graduates so they could buy needed equipment.

I truly believe that AOM would benefit from the help of other volunteers. The great thing is that you can be good at anything and there will be a job for you. So if teaching is not your strength, help is needed to set up the micro business and the children at the orphanage and the schools will be very happy to have a companion and to know that people care.

**Helen is 18 years old and volunteering in her gap year before continuing her education at Cambridge. She has taught English in India and volunteered in Kenya. Her contributions to the children and program has made a wonderful difference in their lives. Thank you Helen. Helen has also brought us up to speed with a facebook page (aom) madagascar**