

Postcard



From: **Poppy, USA**

Volunteered in:

**Melkhoutfontein
+ Montagu, South
Africa**

When: **2023**



During the summer of my sophomore year in high school, I went on a once-in-a-lifetime volunteering experience to South Africa. Although I have been here once before, going again and truly experiencing and becoming aware of underprivileged communities that I would usually not see on vacations, was really special and important for me to both grow as a person and to do it in one of my favourite places. During my month in South Africa, I volunteered under the auspices of the Dreamcatcher South Africa and helped with many projects for this amazing nonprofit organisation and based some of my volunteering around medicine. Because going into medicine has always been something I wanted to learn about and do in the future, I thought that this was an excellent opportunity to get to know the many different jobs and specifics of what medicine entailed. Another standout, of the many reasons that I decided to volunteer with Dreamcatcher South Africa is their ethos regarding sustainability and their drive to concretely embrace the UN Sustainable Development Goals for the betterment of the impoverished communities in South Africa. To get to work with and volunteer for such a unique and innovative organization, was truly an experience I will always keep close to my heart.

During my first couple of days in South Africa, we travelled from Cape Town to Stilbaai and received a comprehensive introduction and orientation outlining my volunteer work programme plans for the month-long stay. As soon as all the logistics were completed, I went on an extensive road trip with the Dreamcatcher team, engaging and dropping off English storybooks at farm schools along the way as they do not have access to English reading books. I also took the vitals of the girls in a lovely town called Montagu. We did this in order to gather statistics on the girls' overall health, nutrition and how much weight they have gained since the last volunteers visit. By doing this, it provided me a little bit of insight and knowledge on the health of the children in the community and what we can do to hopefully resolve their challenges on weight and healthy habits. This was probably one of my favourite days, as I also became aware of how a lot of schools in South Africa do not have the same privileges and opportunities as schools in America. I also learned how to do a traditional dance with the help of the girls in the community. It was such fun!

The next few days, I researched about hygiene to prepare for my presentation about hygiene to the kids in the school in Melkhoutfontein, another underprivileged community situated outside Stilbaai. By doing this, I was able to learn more about general hygiene and be able to teach others on how to achieve good hygiene despite their circumstances. I also walked around the community, engaged and helped survey people about lung problems that they might have due to the extensive burning of waste which occurred over a protracted number of years close to the community. During this time, I also got to know Elmordine, part of the Dreamcatcher team and First Aid Responder, who accompanied me surveying the people. During this time, I learned a lot about lung problems and how they are instilled, whether by genetics or because of the environments where people live. Being a First Aider (having obtained my First Aid certificate) also helped me put into practice what I had learned in the course, and it is one of the things I hope to advance in.

After another day of surveying the community and taking the vitals of the children in the Melkhoutfontein school, I moved on to volunteering at the local Stilbaai Fynbos Extensive Primary Health Care pharmacy. This was one of the volunteering opportunities specifically developed for my programme, as I have always been interested in medicine and I wanted to learn more about it. I learned how to pack pills, how to complete accountability ethics efficiently, and I got the hang of putting each medicine in the correct area depending on what it helps for. I also saw the exact process of dispensing a prescription to someone and talked to the primary physician at the pharmacy about what she did and how she got to where she was in her career. During my free leisure times, I also spent a lot of time reading a pharmacy book that had a lot of medicine terms and which medicines to take for each condition; it was really interesting to read about all of these different conditions. During these next 5-6 days volunteering at the pharmacy, I got a really special opportunity to stay with a Homestay Kamamma in Melkoutfontein, immersing myself and learning about the culture of the community.

These were also some of my fondest memories, uniquely connecting with people who live in Melkhoutfontein and finding out the inside stories of what it is like to live there (especially with load shedding – this is when all access to mainstream power is switched off), and how the resilient folk adapt and innovated to deal with these challenges on a daily basis.

After my practical educational time at the pharmacy I said my goodbyes to both the pharmacy team and also Homestay Kamamma Gerty and her family and moved back to the Dreamcatcher Home Office where I stayed for the last week of my time in South Africa.

The next day, I volunteered at a Dreamcatcher event which had been planned for a group 52 South African volunteers called 'A Happy Bunch'. My role was supervising the First Aid Station, setting and delivering food parcels donated and packed on site for the community. Although this was a long and hard day, I was really glad to see the amount of local volunteers who took time out of their day for service projects to help the community. It made me realize that Dreamcatcher's approach to projects, implemented after researching local needs, are truly impactful helping communities in South Africa, and have truly sustainable outcomes.

After this beautiful event, I went on to volunteer at the Carewell Hospital (another volunteering opportunity personalized for me), where I made food for diabetics and found out what kinds of foods they can eat and why. I also helped one of the nurses complete forms for newly admitted patients. This really demonstrated what it is like to be a nurse and how knowing your patient and their medical condition is really important.

I was part of the Dreamcatcher First Responder Aid team voluntary caring for a terminally ill patient with cancer. Although it was disheartening to care for the patient, after helping bathe, massage her legs, it truly made my day seeing how happy she was after we just took a little bit of our time to make her feel more comfortable. It was sad to hear our patient passed away a couple of weeks later. It was humbling to have been part of her last days.

For the last few days in South Africa, we went on little road trips to Mossel Bay to have some fun at the longest single zipline in the world and eat some of the best ostrich burgers I have had at the Cango Wildlife Nature Reserve. It was really fun to have some relaxing days where I could take in the true beauty of South Africa and look out into the ocean from its beautiful beaches.

After dropping off some more books at different schools and getting ready for our departure back to America. Enroute to the airport we visited the Montagu girls one last time to drop off some more resources and books for them to help with their schooling and bought some dried fruits from the amazing dried fruit farms (my favorite ones were the sugared fruit straws!). It was –finally time to say goodbye to the community and Dreamcatcher team.

Going through the collection of the beautiful pictures we took on our safari in Botlierskop and watching the video we took learning how to do a local dance with the Montagu girls, it was time to reflect on my time spent on my trip and volunteering with Dreamcatcher. I think that I came into this trip thinking I knew all about South Africa and how the people lived, and how I was doing the best I could to be sustainable and humble. However, after this experience, I realized that that was simply not true. The most important thing I learned from seeing how differently I lived from other children my age, yet noticing how happy they still were, is to always be grateful for what you have and apply it to help others, because there are those who have less than me that would not take a second thought to be kind and hospitable towards me. I also got to fully immerse myself in medical related volunteering, to experience what it was like and to learn about all of these different opportunities in medicine. Dreamcatcher South Africa helped me realize how much I could give back to the beautiful world that I live in, no matter how small or big my efforts to help are. And because of what I learned during my time in South Africa, I decided that I wanted to make a difference at my school and get more involved in my pathway of working in medicine by starting a Red Cross Club at my school. In the future, I hope to bring back other students to experience what I just have, because it is truly something I will never forget.

Poppy