A summer in Ethiopia

I was a person who had toyed with the idea of missionary work all my life. I had not made any progress on the issue until I saw the advert that the Vincentian lay missionaries had placed in InTouch in the spring of 2009.

I pondered long and hard about giving up my valuable summer. Finally I made the call. The training day was held in the beginning of May. There was bad news. We, the volunteers were required to raise €3000.

I am not a fundraiser, nor had I any wish to fundraise. I organised a quiz with the help of some friends. We raised over €400. It was not until I met Mrs Kathleen Conlon of Sligo who told me about the INTO Solidarity Fund that my fundraising took off. I wrote to the INTO and the cheque arrived. My school, Scoil Mhuire, Ramelton, offered to help and they raised over €600. My family, friends, colleagues and former colleagues all helped. I had reached my target by the end of June.

My assignment was to teach in Atse school in Addis Abeba Ethiopia for five weeks beginning on 11 July. A lot of preparation was required. We got our varications, we bought school supplies, appropriate clothes and we were off.

I was joined by Ms Fiona Mallen, Ms Charlotte McQuaid and Mr Padraig Conlon. We took the long flight via Amsterdam and Khartoum to Addis. We were met by Sister Mary Mitchel from Galway who is the Director of the school. We travelled to the convent which was to be our home for the next five weeks.

When we arrived we had bread and jam to eat, the electricity was off. Ethiopians have electricity every second day. We were shown to our rooms.

Addis Abeba is cold particularly at night. It is at a high altitude and there is no central heating. During the day it rains, torrential rain and it is not as warm as Ireland.

There was a washing machine but no drier so drying clothes was a problem.

We arrived Saturday night and began work on Monday morning. We became ill, fortunately, I managed to stay on my feet. I was asked to teach English and some art. My colleagues taught maths and PE. We taught six 45 minute periods a day beginning at 8.30 each morning.

The children were aged between 11 and 17. Some of the children were Aids orphans. They had great ambitions for themselves, as only the young can have. Many of them wore the same outfits for the duration of the summer.

They were sometimes noisy and difficult to manage. The classrooms were dark, it was impossible to see the children sometimes during the rains. But they were on the whole wonderful and appreciative of the work being done for them.
We met many other Irish people who were on other projects in Ethiopia, some of whom who had lost their jobs because of the recession. I was lucky to have a job to return to.

The people we met were the salt of the earth, the experience was enriching. It was not a holiday though we had great fun and there was great camaraderie among us. If you want to change your life and outlook see www.vlm.ie. You will not regret it.

Colette Ní Ghallchóir is a learning support teacher at Scoil Mhuire Ramelton, Co Donegal. She has published two books of poetry Na sióga I lag na h-Altóra/Idir dhá ghleann both published by Coiscéim. She is a third year part time student in Irish language and literature at UU Magee.

For more information and guidelines on applications to the INTO Solidarity Fund, please log on to https://www.into.ie/ROI/MembersArea/INTOGrantsandFunding/INTOSolidarityFund/ or contact Georgina Glacken (01 8047745)