

NIALL MELLON TOWNSHIP TRUST CHALLENGE



In February our thoughts merge with St Valentine in an expression of love. Ciara Kelleher shares her safari with IPA Journal; this sunny tale will, no doubt, inspire readers with a desire to join in the scheme, all you have to do is view <http://www.irishtownship.com/> to be one of the happy 2008 volunteers required in November 2008. Here is what Ciara wrote to Noel Kelleher at IPA House.

I just wanted to thank everyone for their overwhelming support and generosity in sponsoring me on the Niall Mellon Township Trust Challenge. I know everyone has been asking me how I got on and I must admit I'm very tardy sending this mail, but you can blame the tax deadline on that. But to be honest I'm not sure where to start. The whole experience was mind blowing.

To start off no-one believed I could raise the required minimum of €4,000 in a week and as previously stated, given my crap fund raising skills, I wasn't so sure myself. However some of my clients pledged €1,980 almost instantaneously, my brother's work crew gave him €1,200 within 24 hours (and he's as bad as I at fund raising!), some of my clients gave €400 and my own family gave me the €2,000 to cover my flights and accommodation for the week. My parents & Aunt Mary organized a 'Coffee Morning' in the Church, while I was paragliding off a speed boat in Egypt (Oh the guilt!) and they raised over €3,500 between two Masses. Some of my old Citigroup team even went over to help my folks in my absence and told them I was still working them hard even though I'd left the bank 18 months ago.



Niall and I



Family of 6 lived in here



Me and the school children



Hard at work



We finished his house in the week!

Anyway the total pledged/raised to date is just over €11,500 and ALL funds have been assigned to the charity which will fund ongoing building initiatives by local builders. Go raibh mile maith agaibh go léir!

With regard the week in South Africa itself, I must say that words and photos can't really adequately express the experience. Over 1300 volunteers in one place took a huge amount of logistical co-ordination and in fairness the preparation and detail undertaken by the NMTT was phenomenal. Niall shook hands with every single person who got off the plane at some queer hour of the morning and thanked us all for flying for something like 20hrs (stopover in Ghana) to get there.

We had approx 3 hrs sleep that first night and then had to report for a briefing and onto the site immediately next day. We had a full-time squad of armed South African police assigned to us for the week and they accompanied us to and from Freedom Park (shacktown) on a daily basis and did everything possible to ensure everyone's personal safety. I had been told that Ross Kemp did one of his gang-land series from the township and that it was one of the most dangerous places on the face of the earth. Nice one!!!!

However we need not have worried because we were greeted by a huge giddy crowd of locals who were all hyped up for our visit. The kids were holding up pictures of houses that they'd drawn of how they envisaged their new homes to be. It was hard enough to keep our composure and of course I didn't want to be doing the whole girly crying thing with a sea of builders walking beside me.

However once on the site, we all got down and dirty literally. Conditions were rough; you'd to hang on to your supplies and everyone got very territorial with regards

ladders, wheelbarrows, favourite brushes, scaffolding etc etc. Supplies were like precious commodities, so much so, in the absence of rags to clean stuff up, every night I'd cut up the t-shirt I'd worn that day and hand them out as fresh rags to our little team the next day. One guy I met had come from one side of the roof he was working on to the other and his scaffolding had been dismantled and was being used elsewhere. I myself was on dodgy scaffolding in the middle of a sand storm and had 6 burly men at my feet (every girl's dream!) wanting to literally take the floor from under me. I never sanded and varnished as quickly in my life!

The weather didn't help. Some days it was scorching and you'd be applying suncream over paint-speckled skin and other days there would be a sand storm and you were literally eating the sand. (Powerful exfoliation qualities – I'm sure you've all noticed how radiant I've been looking) Even after half an hour in the power shower later on you'd still be getting sand out of your ears, but it was never far from your mind that at least we could go home to said power shower. The locals had to live there in the worst poverty conditions I've ever seen with no sanitation and just a communal tap. Another stark reminder was the fact that the volunteers had their own portaloos with water and soap but a security guy was placed outside to ensure no locals used them; it never ceased to amaze me how all of the people who lived in these conditions could turn into work as waiters and service personnel as bright as button.

I visited a family in one of the shacks and was nearly sick with the smell of the filth, dogs underfoot, kids with running noses etc and the eldest boy came in from school like a show case for Daz, all kitted out in his school uniform. We were told that the average life span on the camps was 43 years of age with a very high percentage of



OMG - The local butcher



The Red Team



Girl who got a University science degree - no lekkie or running water



The Creche



Cooking sheep's heads



Ciara Kelleher & Diarmuid Gavin

the community with AIDS. Surprisingly there is a very low suicide rate. Their determination and upbeat spirit in the face of adversity was certainly awe-inspiring.

We also had the opportunity to visit some of the camps from previous years where I was introduced to the local hair salon (cut and blow dry less than a €1) and the local butchers shop; trust me when I tell you this was one of the most disgusting things I've seen, ever! Your insides would want to be made of iron to withstand the impact of some of the stuff they'd laid out on a dirty table. That and the lady cooking sheep's heads at 6.30am in the morning and I was never so glad to get to the building site and paint a few houses!

It was actually quite hilarious on site every day because most of the locals would be coming up to you and thanking you directly and profusely; telling you how wonderful you are to your face, and as you can imagine, a load of Irish people, who as a race just can't take compliments at all, just stood there shuffling their feet or looking up at the sky and then would say something profound like "Do you like the colour of the walls?". You'd be hoarse shouting to be heard over machinery and getting the uninitiated NOT to varnish over concrete or paint and to sand the bloody window first! But sure I was in "process improvement" heaven, so much so some of the guys wanted me to come back next year as foreman. I can indeed wear my Bob the Builder title with pride.

On the last day we had the privilege of handing over the keys of the houses to the families. Not a dry eye in the house; etched on my brain forever. There was also a handing over ceremony for the "Garden of Hope" which was beautiful with a little play area for the children. My sister-in-law insisted under threat of life and limbs that I

get a picture with Diarmuid Gavin. You'll find in no time she'll have superimposed her head over mine, so you get to see the original photo here first! Leaving the camp for the last time, volunteers were handing over the shirts off their backs, their tools and even their boots to the locals and traipsing onto the bus tired and in stocking feet. There was such a rush to get stuff from us and such a feeling of desperation because we were leaving, that the police had a tough enough time keeping crowd control.

The week's efforts drew to a close with a gala dinner attended by Desmond Tutu's wife, the Irish Ambassador to South Africa, Nelson Mandela's right hand man and other dignitaries. A letter was read out from Nelson Mandela (who they refer to as Madiba) thanking all the volunteers for their efforts. We all received a copy of the letter with an individual picture for each of us from a child of the township which I have to say we'll all hold onto with pride. Apparently a new phrase among the children was "You're being Irish to me" which means "You're being nice to me"! The building week will not solve the problems in the townships and there is considerable resistance to the initiative, mostly amongst the white community. However the unbelievable kindness and support that was given to me in undertaking this challenge shows me that even the most cynical amongst us want to hope that the cycle of poverty and racism could be broken for the next generation.

If you actually make it to the end of this email, fair play. Now you know why I said, words can't really express. Some photos might help you set the scene in your mind.

Thanks again.

Ciara



Raymond Duffy (TL), moi and Grainne Byrne



The Kids



The First House we finished!