

Sally Woodward -
SSAFA Forces Help Children's Holiday Volunteer 2007



Little did I realize a visit to the dentist would lead to a trip to Exmoor. Flicking through a paper, and trying to ignore the sound the drill, I saw a picture of a serviceman and the word SSAFA. I went home, having avoided the drill, Googled SSAFA and sent off an email. I applied to take part in the Outward Bound Holiday for children with special needs.

I was accepted as a Volunteer and read and re-read the paperwork. Nine months later the walking boots, fluffy towel and sunblock were packed and I headed off to the Calvert Trust on Exmoor. Footsteps into the unknown...

The Calvert Trust is a set in beautiful countryside overlooking a wooded reservoir and it became our home for the next week. Everyone spends the first day training - the volunteers are both military and civilian. The group were an eclectic bunch - many had been on previous SSAFA Holidays, some were adrenaline junkies who jumped out of planes for a living and ran triathlons for fun, some were medics who put people back together again. One arrived with a Bergen I could not even pick up, and a teddy bear in one of the pockets, others worked in commerce or for SSAFA and then there was me, looking for a challenge and a way to give something back....

The children arrived the following day and suddenly the printed profiles became little people with their individual needs, wants and characters. The birdsong was replaced by exuberant, energetic excited children. Every day each team was assigned different challenges involving outdoor pursuits - canoeing, horse riding, abseiling, rock climbing, archery etc. It rained. Every day. Most of the children just smiled and got on with it. The coaches fought for space in the drying room in the evening and grew resigned to wet feet and soggy socks.

As a coach our role is to encourage not just our child but each one in the team to try a new skill or reach a goal. For some of the children it was the taking of the first tiny step to face a fear and then overcome a challenge.

The days are long, exhausting, exhilarating and fun. Once the children are in bed for the night it is time for the debrief, team meeting and the Pritt stick. A diary is kept by each coach which provides a written account of the child's holiday, but the scrap book is something for the children to read once the holiday is a memory. It soon became apparent the naval medic was the equivalent of Damien Hurst with

his cotton wool sheep and artistic flair. I made a note in my black book to Google 'shortcuts to awesome art with Pritt stick and glitter' when I got home.

The Staff at the Calvert Trust are very professional and fantastic with the children. Each of the three teams is assigned two instructors who encourage and cajole the children to try each of the various activities. We spent the week either climbing up or down ropes or trying to keep pace with a horse.

We sailed and kayaked and spent our time on or in the lake. We walked and got wet in the rain and then fought for the space in the drying room! We spent a day away from the centre at a farm which included a wide range of activities for the children. Part of its beauty lay in the fact that it was undercover and thus we avoided the rain! But more importantly it offered a safe environment for the children to interact with one another and I shall always treasure the words of one very quiet little boy who came up to me with his coach and softly said "Would you like to join us".

The week passed and as quickly as they had arrived, the children left and the swings fell silent.

Time to head homeward and time to reflect.... I remember asking someone from SSAFA to explain exactly what the holiday entailed and I also remember some one asking me why I would want to undertake such a week.

If I were asked to describe the week on Exmoor I would probably say it is not a week for coffee breaks and the hair straighteners. It is long, demanding week, both emotionally and physically and it requires total commitment to not just your child but all the children and the team. There also needs to be an acceptance of the fact that children gravitate to different coaches and form friendships with other children. This is not a slight or criticism of coaching skills. You just accept it within the group and work as a unit. My child for example, was quite independent and was very caring towards other children so that changed my role slightly, but you adapt to the circumstances. You have to be a team player with a sense of humour. It requires honesty and a vast reservoir of patience. I think you come away from the experience with a different outlook and perspective on life. It makes you question certain values and perceptions and in the act of giving the reward is returned in terms of friendship smiles and memories. I found it an immensely humbling experience and a huge privilege to be with very special children and a fantastic group of people. I will take away some incredible memories - of a little boy who found the courage to paddle a canoe on the lake. Of a little child whose smile melted my heart and a little boy who rang a little bell at the top of the climbing wall and touched everyone's heart.

I found my challenge along with a special crew where our world became a child, a team, a rucksack, soggy socks, a scrap book, Pritt stick and a smile.....

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