

# Freedom Park

## Cape Town



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*Pauline's very moving account of her week long experience on Niall Mellon's Township Builders' Blitz shows how much this Project means to the people of the Townships that have benefited from the dedication of one man and the thousands of volunteers who return to South Africa year after year to participate in the building of houses.*

In 2006 after meeting with Niall Mellon in Shelbourne Park, I made a decision to volunteer for the Builders' Blitz 2007, which was to be held in "Freedom Park" in Mitchel's Plane, in Cape Town, South Africa.

Each volunteer was required to raise a minimum of €4,000, so I decided to write to friends, family and clients explaining what the Builders' Blitz was all about and basically asking for donations, no matter how small, towards my goal of working in the Township Building Project. I was overwhelmed by the response which I received and subsequently collected a staggering €11,000. This made it possible to build and pay for two houses.

I arrived in Cape Town on November 2, 2007 at the ungodly hour of 1.30am, along with 1,379 other volunteers, to be met at the airport by Niall Mellon himself. He took the time to shake hands with all 1380 volunteers. He is one of the nicest and most sincere people I have ever had the privilege to meet.

After arriving at our respective hotels and getting to bed at around 3.00am, it was soon time to arise at 6.00am to start what became the most amazing week of my life.

We were led into the site in "Freedom Park" by a volunteer playing the bagpipes and to the most amazing welcome from all of the people in the Township, who would now benefit from the generosity of the Irish in having for the first time in their lives a proper home to live in. The criteria for qualifying for one of Niall Mellon's houses was that each family had to have lived for at least nine years in a shack.

Words cannot fully describe the conditions in which these beautiful people have been living, many of them for their entire lives. Just remembering the happy faces of not only the adults, but the huge smiles on the faces of the children, brings tears to my eyes.

The volunteers were divided into teams. Each team had a different coloured t-shirt to wear, so as to easily identify which team they were working on. 200 houses was the target to be built in one week so there was no time to delay. Once on site, there was a short introduction by our foreman, Eamonn Hassett from Kildare, before the work began. All the materials were on site and the foundations for the houses were ready. I had initially thought that my task would be to help in the painting of the exterior of some of the houses. But I soon learned that this was to be only one of my many tasks.

At the end of my first day I had pains in muscles that I didn't even know I had.

From being part of what we nickname the "Chain Gang", passing blocks and roof tiles, I soon learnt to climb scaffolding to help with the erection of soffits, without the need for a ladder. I was so proud of myself and amazed at the strength and determination of all my "terracotta team". What a privilege to have worked with all of them.

As the week progressed, it was so funny to see the erection of the different County flags around the site, representing all 32 counties and provinces, and also many of the volunteers arriving on site wearing their County colours.

## The Property Valuer

During the week those who wanted to, were given the opportunity to visit some of the families and one of the local schools. My turn came on Wednesday of that week, when, accompanied by five of my team members, we were taken to the home (shack really) of one of the families. Though I had seen these shacks from the outside, nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to witness. Two rooms divided by a curtain, in a shack held together by wood, corrugated iron and what ever they could get their hands on, to keep the place together.

The first family consisted of mother, father and five children, ranging from the age of 2 up to 15 years. All seven slept in one room between two beds, with no running water or sanitary facilities of any description. We asked the parents why the children did not attend school and could hardly believe it when they told us that in order to send the children to school, they would have to pay up front the equivalent of €15 per child per year. They of course could not afford this as neither of the parents could find any work and this was the case with many of the families.

Despite all of this and the obvious hardship these people had to endure on an on going basis, it didn't dampen their spirits. They are extremely hygiene conscious and keep their homes as clean as they possibly can under the circumstances.

The following day a group of us were taken to the local school to meet with some of the privileged few children whose parents managed to put enough money together to educate them. As we walked from classroom to classroom, being entertained by the children, we came across a group of children who were chanting something. I asked one of them what they were saying, and laughed when I was told, "Up the Kingdom, Up the Kingdom". Obviously living in Kerry I was delighted. Apparently, the day before we came to the school a group of volunteers from Kerry had taught the children this chant and had instructed them to say it when we arrived.

At the end of this extremely tiring week work was completed on 203 houses, a Community Centre and a Garden of Hope for the children. The emotion of it all was unbelievable. All 1,380 volunteers along with many local dignitaries, watched as Niall Mellon handed over the keys to the Community Centre to one of the community leaders. This was followed by all of us being led again by the piper, singing "Amhrán na bhFiann".

Leaving the site that day for the last time was an anti climax. The township people again lined the route, thanking us; many had signs written saying things like, "Safe Trip Home", "Thanks to the Irish for our new homes" and "Come Back Again".



Community Centre and Garden of Hope.

On our way back to the hotel on the bus, that last day, there was very little chatting. I think we were all lost in our own thoughts of what we had experienced.

When my husband (who joined me in South Africa at the end of the week) and I visited Freedom Park on the Sunday after the building had finished none of the families had yet moved into their homes. However, we did meet three sisters in one of the houses. When we asked them if this was going to be their home, they said yes and brought us into one room, where the eldest girl was putting some lino onto the floor. They told us this was going to be their bedroom, with broad smiles on their faces; well need I say more.

Since coming home I have heard on radio and have also read in the newspapers, some bad press in relation to some of the families who have been given these houses. Reports alleged that they don't actually move into them, but rent them to others. Well the reality is that a very small percentage, as little as one percent, have been known to do so. Some also have been known to rent out a room in their new homes. Who can blame them for doing this for they have no jobs and very little money in order to raise their families? What would any of us do in similar circumstances!

I really could go on for ever, but I hope I have given a small indication of what the week was like. The photographs accompanying the article will tell a story which I may not have been able to express in words.

**I have volunteered again to go back to South Africa in November of this year.**



A typical Township shack.



The fruits of a week of intensive building.