Egyptian learning curves

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Travel is fun isn't it? We all have big dreams about travelling to distant foreign and exotic lands. For some it may be to Paris or Rome, others it may even be to the Opera House. We all have our places that if we were given the opportunity we would dream of going. I want you for a second to imagine an exotic place you have visited. (If you haven't travelled much think of an exotic destination you have always dreamed of going!) Can you remember what the people were like? What did you eat? How did people respond to foreigners? Was the Exchange Rate in your favour? Now imagine if you lived in that country for a year. You were totally immersed in that culture, away from family and friends, away from the comforts of home; simply because God placed a call on your heart to do the work that is needed. Welcome to the life of volunteer service learning.

My name is Herbert; I am 21 years old and am currently studying theology at Avondale College of Higher Education. I have just come back to Australia from being a volunteer at Nile Union Academy on the outskirts of Cairo, Egypt. You may be asking why Egypt? It's actually a funny story. My passion is to do music ministry, and I was procrastinating from doing a Systematic Theology essay one night and for some reason during my 'study break' I came across the South Pacific Division's Volunteer website (www.adventistvolunteers.org). I searched through the calls and I came across a Worship Leader position in Egypt. Without one thought of consideration I emailed the principal, and before I knew it one month later I was in Egypt.

Nile Union Academy is a Seventh-day Adventist boarding academy in a town called El Gabal El Asfar just on the outskirts of Cairo. We have 135 students half being Egyptian, half being from South Sudan. Egypt's population is just over 81 million people, and the population of practicing Adventists are just over 500. It's illegal to proselytise so the School is Egypt's primary source of evangelism.

Egypt was very different to what I initially expected. For starters the pyramids are grey not golden. There was a lot more trash than I expected, there are places in the world that have worse traffic than Sydney during peak hour, and Cairo is much hotter than I expected! But more importantly Egyptians are some of the most beautiful and friendliest people I've ever met in my life.

My job was to be a PE Teacher and the Music/Worship Leader for the campus. I have never taught a class in my life. I hate sport. I was always chosen last for the sport team. Was I in way over my head? You bet I was! I did not feel prepared at all. I felt that I would be the worst teacher in the entire world.

I'm going to share some of my experiences as a teacher. Most teachers have four years of training to learn how to be a teacher. I had three days. I tried to prepare my classes. I asked other teachers how to teach. I even tried positive thinking by telling myself I knew what I was doing. Nothing could prepare me for what came ahead though. The first day of class came. The students lined up. I ignored my fears and went with my gut. I told the students to run laps! See, I learnt a valuable lesson that day. The trick to teaching is to act as if you know what you're doing even if you have no clue.





[Photographs: Herbert Bergmann]

Days went by, weeks went by, and months went by. Each day I had a better idea of what I was doing. Each day I trusted in God who alone could have gotten me through. The end of semester eventually arrived, and it was time for the Teacher Evaluations to be filled in by the students. Mine essentially said, "Learn to teach". I laughed it off, and thankfully, by God's grace, I did a much better job in the second semester.

I did have some positive experiences, however. I was a worship leader for the campus so this meant I ran all the music services. I taught four music lessons a day, taught choir at night time, and ran other leadership classes teaching the students how to be a good leader.

Being a volunteer teacher means that people don't expect you to be the perfect teacher; the more important factor is that you're present. During my spare time I invested in building relationships with the students. When you take time to get to know your students it's surprising how forgiving they can be in the classroom.

I grew so much from this experience. It challenged me in ways that I never ever imagined I would be challenged. I learnt not to feel sorry for the students when I disciplined them, and learned not to 'people please' by changing the grades of the whole class so that one student wouldn't fail! But most of all I learnt that trusting in God is the only way you will get through. Take it one day at a time. When you feel as though you can't take another step, God gives you the strength just to put that next foot forward.

I will always remember my time in Egypt. Please join me in praying for Nile Union Academy in its changing and challenging context. And if God asks you to 'volunteer', choose to 'grow' by following His lead. TEACH

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Below: Herbert Bergmann in 'custom' dress

