

## The Best Way

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“Put yourself in their shoes and devote yourself to helping them.” I often hear these words at my school. My school, a Catholic school, teaches us the importance of helping others. I agreed with the concept and donated some money to developing countries. However, until a few years ago, I was not satisfied with what I was doing. I donated money to less fortunate people without knowing much about them. I began to wonder if donating money was the best way to help others.

To find the answer, I decided to join a two-week volunteer program in Madagascar by applying to the Tobitate Ryugaku Japan project two years ago. The program looked ideal to find the answer. Madagascar is in the African region, which is one of the poorest countries in the world. Actually, 90% of the nation spend less than 2 dollars a day. I thought that I would be able to see the real situation in a developing country with my own eyes and find out what I really should do.

During the stay, I had a lot of chances to get to know the people and their lifestyle. As a volunteer, I could stay at a guest house where I could get a bottle of clean water, take a hot shower, and sleep in a nice bed in a room. However, the people there were living with deplorable housing conditions. They had to carry water with a bucket since many shared one faucet with other families. I tried it, but it was so heavy that my hands hurt a lot. The already muddy roads became slippery on rainy days, which made it even harder to carry water. Also there were a lot of children wearing clothes with holes in them. When they saw my pencil case with a lot of pens, they asked me to give them some. They were even pleased to receive things like toothbrushes I took for them. Everything I saw there was a real eye opener.

The most unforgettable experience in Madagascar was a talk with a Malagasy staff member, Andri. He showed me his broken phone and said that he needed to take it to the next town to have it repaired. I just felt it was troublesome, but his next words surprised me. He said, “I don’t have enough money to go to the next town.” When I heard that, I was lost for words. For me, going to the next town was normal. However, he didn’t seem to care about it. He was smiling! Then I understood the situation was just “normal” for him. Before visiting Madagascar, I thought people in developing countries were suffering all the time and they needed money. However, I saw people there enjoying their lives. Of course, their lives are not easy, but they looked happy and content. Soon I realized it was not right to stereotype people and their lives from our

point of view and just send money. Instead, I should have tried to know their “normal” and find what they really need.

It has been about two years since I stayed in Madagascar. The precious days in Madagascar made me think that knowing others’ “normal” is what I should do first and then get others involved. That’s why I have dedicated time to learning the “normal” of people in developing countries. For example, I made a refugee card game and did a presentation about education in Cambodia. Under this situation, it’s not easy for us to go outside, but there are some ways to help others. Donating money is one, but before that, know the people, know the country and know their “normal. Now, I know, and I am ready to start a new movement “Put yourself in their shoes and devote yourself to helping others”.