

## Mathias, The Orpheus Centre (IN THE UK)

### INFORMATION ABOUT MYSELF

When I first started, I was an 18-year-old German high-school graduate who had always enjoyed working with children as well as doing sports and playing music. I'm the youngest of three brothers and have been very active and engaged in extra-curricular stuff at school as well as activities beyond. After finishing my A-Levels, I wasn't quite sure what exactly to do with my life. Thus, I had decided to volunteer abroad as I was desiring to develop myself personally in both an intercultural and a social way. When I then found my project on the EVS database, I felt challenged and applied immediately.



### MY PROJECT

The Orpheus Centre is a performing arts college for young adults with learning and/or physical disabilities in Surrey. It was founded in 1998 by the British musician Richard Stilgoe with the aim of helping disabled 18-25-year-olds live independently by providing supported housing and offering a curriculum around the performing arts to boost young learners' confidence. It has since moved on to go beyond performing arts, but the focus remains with a full-size Christmas and Summer production performed (and mostly developed) by the students each year.

### MY ROLE AT THE ORPHEUS CENTRE

Together with two girls, another EVS volunteer from Austria and a third-year music student from northern England, I worked as a Residential Volunteer at the Orpheus Centre. We spent the whole week from Monday to Friday mainly supporting in learning sessions, mainly following a tutor group that consisted of six students. This usually involved supporting group work in class or helping individual students to access sessions and to work as independently as possible, always based on their immediate needs. Apart from being Learning Support Assistants in class, we offered lunch club activities and served as role models for the learners. Unlike the other staff, there was no age gap between us and the students, which was the ground for the different kind of relationship we had to the students. As we didn't have too many formal duties, I enjoyed the freedom the role gave us as well as the additional appreciation we received from all staff and students.

### A TYPICAL DAY FOR ME...

Normally, I would get up in the morning around 8.30 am to get ready for work by 9.15. I'd then go over to the barn (sort of our assembly hall) and spend time with all the students before and during their joint morning orientation. Afterwards, there would be two morning sessions, a lunch break and two afternoon sessions. Sessions at Orpheus included artistic subjects (e.g. Drama, Music, Arts) as well as functional skills (Maths, English) and life skills (e.g. Independence, Work Skills).

Since I worked with a specific set of students for most of the classes, I knew them well enough to offer helpful yet discreet support and even was able to support local volunteers, who spend less time with them, in their work in class. After a 90-minute lunch break with a quick and lunch club activities which we either supported or led (e.g. choir, badminton, out of session work) we would have two more afternoon sessions before we'd finish our work day around 4.30 pm. In the evenings, me and my two flatmates cooked had dinner together. It felt a lot like family.

### **WHAT I GOT UP TO WHEN I WASN'T VOLUNTEERING**

Apart from our volunteering work in sessions, the year offered plenty of time to enjoy oneself on a day-to-day basis and to travel during the holidays. In term time, me and my two fellow Residential Volunteers had an exciting set of sports and music activities in the evenings. Additionally, we always had the weekends off which enabled us to get to know the area around as well as other nice spots between Brighton and London. During the holidays, I discovered the British Isles, both with my flatmates and friends and family from home. I managed to visit all places I wanted to see, including for example Scotland, Ireland, Cornwall, London and the big cities in North England.

### **THE MOST INTERESTING THING ABOUT LIVING & VOLUNTEERING IN UK IS**

For me, the year abroad and the whole experience was, except for the language, mainly about the people I spent time with. It was absolutely fantastic to live in a shared flat with two other volunteers, but it was as nice to spend time with other colleagues and friends. What I learnt to value the most, was the incredible amount of gratitude and appreciation we received for our work that, in addition to the work and the place itself, really made me want to get up and work on every single day of my year there. Finally, it was exciting to get to know cultural habits and curiosities that encouraged me to reflect on my own cultural biases and stereotypes.

### **FROM MY VOLUNTEER PLACEMENT I LEARNT/GAINED**

It is really hard to tell what one learns during this intense experience, as many things are that normal for you afterwards that you can't imagine anymore not having been able to do things the same way before. However, there are a few things about which I am sure I have learnt them during my EVS. One thing is definitely some sort of (positive) disability awareness. I loved the way disability was treated in my project and after only one or two weeks I literally forgot the students' "disability" while still being able to support them based on their individual needs. Some more directly transferrable gains include an improvement in English language, independence and teaching. Furthermore, I got a lot better at the key qualities of patience, maturity and confidence.

PHOTOS FROM MY TIME IN THE UK

