

TELEGRAPH APPEAL

'In Nepal, all my problems faded away'



Working on projects and meeting people overseas proved to be cathartic for these teenagers - as they reveal to Laura Millar

IT WAS LIBERATING NOT TO BE DEFINED BY WHAT HAD HAPPENED

AFTER BRIDIE O'HARE, 19, FROM CLEETHORPES, WAS CAUGHT UP IN THE MANCHESTER ARENA BOMBING ON MAY 22 2017, A JOB WITH CAMP AMERICA IN JUNE WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE HEALING PROCESS.



The Ariana Grande concert had just finished and I was still in my seat, getting my phone out to call my mum and find out where in the car park she was, when the bomb went off. Just before the sound, it was almost like the air went still and everyone froze; then it felt like a sonic boom echoing through the building. I knew instantly what it was, judging by everyone else's reactions, and my immediate thought was: 'It's going to happen again. I need to get out now.' Luckily, I wasn't far from an exit, but it was mass panic; people were pushing and shoving, kids and adults were screaming - everyone was in fight or flight mode.

I don't remember much else before getting to the car park. I know some people saw flames, and of course some saw horrific sights they'll never forget. Although I made it out safely, it was with the overwhelming sense that if I'd been sitting somewhere else, I might never have made it. I didn't see myself as lucky - more like guilty that I'd survived, when many others didn't.

Afterwards, I went from being a normal, happy, outgoing person to being very withdrawn, and wary. I was scared of going out - what if it happened again? Eventually I started seeing a counsellor, and tried to get back to normal. I even took up my place at Leeds University that September, but I just couldn't deal with it. I found it hard being in an unfamiliar setting, surrounded by people I didn't know, so I moved back home in January [2018]. There I felt safer, but [the attack] was still in the news; I felt I couldn't get away from it. I was having nightmares and always thinking about what had happened.

I'd always wanted to do

Camp America, spending a summer working at a camp with young people. My mum agreed that a change of scene would be a good idea. I hoped that by getting some distance, I would be able to be myself again.

In June I headed to the Skylark Ranch, a girl scout camp in Pescadero, California, just north of Santa Cruz. I had no idea what would be expected of me, but my role was to help run activity programmes for the girls, who ranged from around seven to 17.

My responsibilities varied from overseeing horse-riding to a really fun survival course based on the US TV show Gilligan's Island. We had to show the kids how to make beds out of sticks and twine, and cook meals on a campfire. I'd never pictured myself doing anything like that, but it was great fun. At the end of that activity, we did a 'mud hike', where we all slid down a mudslide into a giant pit of well, mud! It's the sort of thing I would never normally do, but it helped me feel like a kid again and forget all my worries. Having some responsibility, and helping make a change in young people's lives that hopefully they'll remember forever, was a great feeling.

I made really good friends at camp, and after it was over a few of us went on a road trip to New York. I rarely thought about what had happened, and it was liberating not to be defined by it. It did randomly come up in conversation once, but by then I really trusted the people around me so I felt comfortable talking about it. I was sad to come home, but now I really feel I can move on with life and hopefully go back to uni next year.

Further information: campamerica.co.uk

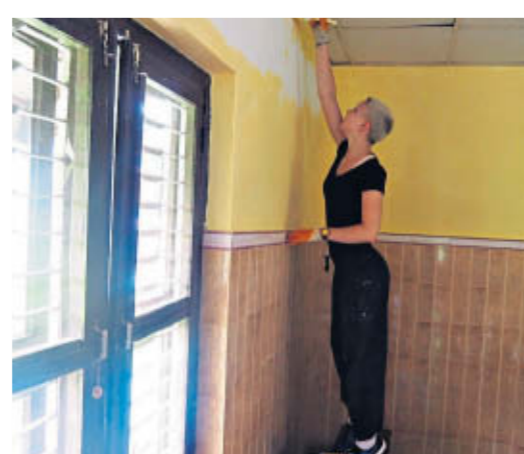
'OUT THERE, I COULD BE MYSELF'

ALEX SMITH*, 19, FROM COVENTRY, FOUND THAT A TRIP TO NEPAL, WHEN SHE WAS 16, HELPED PUT HER PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL INTO PERSPECTIVE.

At the top of the steep steps leading to a viewpoint that overlooks a vast valley in the Annapurna Foothills of Nepal, I burst into tears. As part of my volunteering trip with Global Vision International, we were lucky enough to travel around the country - and this trek took us down the valley, then up these steps, the stairs to Ghandruk. As I looked across at the seemingly endless landscape we'd traversed, I felt an incredible sense of achievement, coupled with a feeling of being utterly tiny and insignificant. It gave me a real sense of perspective; suddenly all the problems I'd experienced back home faded into insignificance.

The girls at my school who made me feel bad about myself just didn't matter - out here, I could be who I was, and everyone I'd met so far had responded to me on that level. It was a highly emotional experience, and it has stayed with me ever since.

Things started to get difficult for me at all-girls school in Coventry around Year 9. I wouldn't call it outright bullying, but something harder to put your finger on. I'd describe myself as an individual, not like everyone else, but that can make you a target. Once, I came in wearing a pair of shoes I'd saved up for, but because some of the girls thought they looked unfashionable, they shared pictures of them on Instagram, saying how horrible they were. I was also teased for the fact that I can speak



Mandarin - I've been learning it for years - and I became more and more shunned and isolated. No one wanted to sit with me at lunchtime, or pick me for gym teams; there was nothing outright nasty, but it was enough to make me miserable and vulnerable. I became withdrawn, and gave up on making friends, throwing myself into my studies. My parents didn't notice how unhappy I was; they saw my good grades and thought I must be OK.

By the time I was 15, things were bad enough for my parents to start thinking about me changing schools. I just wanted to get away from everything and began researching how I could. I found GVI, the only organisation that offered a volunteer programme for people my age, and applied. I chose Nepal because it sounded fascinating. I'd only ever been on family holidays to Spain, and, once, to Sri Lanka, but I'd never done anything truly adventurous. So the next summer I flew off to Kathmandu, more excited than nervous.

It felt instantly overwhelming; the noise, the chaos, the dirt roads... but also absorbing. The volunteer work involved cleaning and renovating the



'At the top of steps leading to a view over a valley near Annapurna, I burst into tears'

dormitories of a school in a tiny village in the middle of rice fields. Seeing where these children lived, it felt so different to my own life - but it was amazing. It showed that I could make a difference to others; as a teenager, you don't feel like you have much power or agency to make things happen, but this proved that, actually, you do. I felt blissfully disconnected from everything during the two weeks I was

there; there was very little Wi-Fi, so it felt like a release from the pressure of social media, which I do think can also be damaging to mental health. A lot of the girls at my first school had the attitude: 'If it's not on Instagram, did it even happen?' rather than just enjoying a moment for what it was.

I loved connecting with people who were different from me. We visited a shelter for women who had been sold

into sex slavery and escaped, but had then been rejected by their families. I'd shaved my head for charity and all these women had shaved heads, too - their hair had been removed when they'd been sold. It was a powerful moment of connection, but for very different reasons.

When I got back, I started at a new school, which felt like a clean slate. I made new friends there, and had much more confidence to be myself. It felt as if I had matured so much in a very short space of time.

These days, I don't get stressed about small things and I also feel incredibly lucky to have so much when so many people have so little. Next year I plan to go to college, but I would definitely do this again - and I recommend it to anyone.

Further information: gvi.co.uk * Name has been changed

'LOOKING OUT AT THE VIEW MADE ME FEEL LIKE I DIDN'T HAVE A CARE IN THE WORLD'

JONATHAN BERRY, 19, FROM LIVERPOOL, STRUGGLED WITH DEPRESSION IN THE AFTERMATH OF HIS PARENTS' DIVORCE, BUT WORKING WITH ELEPHANTS IN CHIANG MAI HELPED HIM FEEL HAPPIER.

Just after I got back from volunteering in Thailand this summer, I met up with my friend Joanne and she said she'd never seen me look so happy. It's certainly true that when I was out there I hadn't felt that good about myself in a very long time.

When I was 14, my parents went through a bad divorce. My brother, sister and I were caught in the middle, and as a result I don't have a relationship with my mum any more. I thought I was dealing with it all OK, but over the next few years I became more and more depressed. I had no idea what I wanted to do after my A-levels and felt really unfulfilled and directionless. I rotated between different jobs and apprenticeships, so I wasn't left on my own to sit and think. I tried to explain about I felt to Joanne, but didn't feel I could open up to others.

While I was at school, we'd gone on a group trip to Peru when I was 15, helping out on a project there. I'd really enjoyed it, and liked knowing that I was contributing to a good cause. Earlier this year, the school where I'm doing teacher-training offered to extend my contract full-time, so I took the opportunity to find another volunteering project before I started again this September. I chose one via GVI, in Chiang Mai, which



HOW TRAVEL CAN HELP IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH

Tom Madders is campaigns director at YoungMinds, which supports parents who are concerned about the mental health of their children. He says: "Taking time out of your normal routine, trying new things and setting yourself new challenges can help you get perspective on how you are feeling and how to take care of yourself."

"Being exposed to other ways of life can also build empathy towards others. But know your boundaries. Finding yourself in an unfamiliar environment without your normal support network around you can be stressful."

For information and advice about looking after yourself, see youngminds.org.uk/find-help

For general information about Young Minds, see youngminds.org.uk

To make a donation to this year's Telegraph Christmas Appeal, see the panel below.

YoungMinds fighting for young people's mental health

Further information: gvi.co.uk

offered the chance to work with elephants, an animal I love, on a conservation programme.

I'd never been away on my own before, so it was scary, but I soon felt like part of the group. I was there for four weeks, but you can stay just one week, so new people were coming and going all the time. My job was to help collect data on eight elephants near Huay Pakoot, where we were based.

Every day we'd hike out into the rainforest to find them, which could take hours, but there was a lot of camaraderie and bonding between the volunteers and the Thai staff. What really struck me, too, was that I never saw anyone local who didn't have a smile on their face. The villagers would be working hard every day, farming, and yet they still found life good. It made me realise we don't have a leg to stand on back home, as far as complaining goes - yet so many of us are miserable. These people were satisfied with very little.

I got into a routine every morning of going to a little cafe run by one of the villagers. I'd get there just as the sun rose and have my coffee lying in a hammock on his deck, overlooking a valley. It was my bit of me-time every day, and I'd look at the view and feel like I didn't have a care in the world.

Making friends helped. Several volunteers based in the UK have come to Liverpool to visit, and I'm off to Northern Ireland soon to meet up with another guy. The experience helped clear my head and made me realise I don't have it that bad - so I'm going back to Thailand after Christmas.

I think mental health issues should be discussed more openly at school, so young people know where they can go for help. I'm currently liaising with government authorities to try to get people to come and talk to the kids at my school. I now feel 100 per cent happier, and a lot more stable.

Going away has had a profound effect on who I am and how I feel.

Further information: gvi.co.uk

BROUGHT TO YOU BY VISIT MALTA



Escape to Malta's sunshine city

Valletta makes for a great winter city break for those who love cuisine and culture, says Sarah Gordon

Set on a peninsula surrounded by the Mediterranean, Malta's bñon capital Valletta knows how to make a big impression. This walled city is a 16th-century time capsule, all cobblestone streets and Baroque buildings of golden limestone.

Visitors sailing into the Grand Harbour must have been dazzled by the elegance of this capital, designed by the Knights of St John as a 'city built by gentlemen for gentlemen', following the Great Siege of 1565.

Today, most visitors arrive by plane - Malta is a mere three-hour hop from the UK - but Valletta still makes an impact. Ornate showstoppers such as the Grand Master's Palace and St John's Co-Cathedral rub shoulders with the modern parliament building and an opera house designed by Italian maestro Renzo Piano.

In fact, the whole city is a Unesco World Heritage Site and one of the most concentrated historic areas in the world. You can explore forts and landscaped gardens with sea views, dine in harbour-side eateries and sip local wine at a

hole-in-the-wall bar in characterful Strait Street. Packed with variety and easy to explore on foot in a couple of days, Valletta makes a perfect city-break destination.

And while northern Europe shivers through the cold months, this Mediterranean gem enjoys more than 300 days of sunshine a year.

Add in charming boutique hotels set in grand houses and restaurants serving up the island's distinctive Mediterranean cuisine, and you have all the ingredients for a delightful weekend break.

Book a trip to coincide with the Valletta Closing Spectacle on 15 December and you'll also get to enjoy live shows and music in St George's Square to round off the city's stint as a European Capital of Culture 2018.

Alternatively, if you visit between 11 and 26 January you can catch classical concerts in spectacular historic buildings as part of the Valletta International Baroque Festival.

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