

Volunteering at Amaudo Itumbauzo; A unique community serving mentally ill people

Polly Eaton has been living and working in south east Nigeria for three years. She used her occupational therapy skills as she worked with homeless mentally ill people and in the local community.

Nigeria is situated in West Africa and with the population of 124 million is the most highly populated African country. Despite being an oil rich country with great potential wealth the health of the nation is poor; the life expectancy at birth is 45 year (male) and 46 years (female). In Nigeria beliefs about mental illness are based largely on supernatural beliefs and traditional healing and faith healing are the most commonly sought solutions. Despite many families best efforts at helping a mentally ill relative, efforts to seek treatment are often costly and ineffective. Consequently those with severe and enduring mental illness often leave the family and end up on the streets.



Polly Eaton (right) facilitating a training session

Itumbauzo is a kingdom in a rural part of Abia State, south east Nigeria. Rural villages nestle in hilly lush vegetation, situated 1 hour from the nearest town, Umuahia. Most people live in mud dwellings and sustain themselves through the main occupation of farming. There is small scale palm oil processing, and logging. There are also cocoa farms which sadly bring little income due to the dismal price cocoa fetches. It is in this unlikely setting that a unique community exists serving homeless mentally ill sufferers and providing a network of psychiatric and rehabilitative services.

Amaudo Itumbauzo was established in 1989, it is a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). One of the aspects of the work of Amaudo Itumbauzo is a centre where destitute mentally ill people are brought for rehabilitation. Amaudo picks up such people from the street and rehabilitates them, traces their family, and ultimately discharges them back to the community with support and a system for monitoring their progress. They are known as residents during their stay in the centre.



Basket making at the Amaudo Workshop

After admission to Amaudo's centre the resident is bathed, clothed and given a room to sleep in. Workers and residents are expected to participate in community activities and life is orientated around a programme of self-care, work, leisure and spiritual activities. Polly has been a volunteer at Amaudo for the past three years and her work has involved the running of the centre and then focussing more specifically on the programme of rehabilitation whilst living in community with over 50 residents at any one time.

Amaudo has recognised the necessity to train people who have mental illness with work skills for a number of reasons including the improved chance of

them being accepted and welcomed back into the family. At the Workshop skills in trades such as farming, carpentry, tailoring, shoe making, basket making and hairdressing are offered. Residents are supervised and assessed in the workshop activities by the Workshop Teachers who report on their progress at a monthly team meeting. Polly has been involved in developing the Workshop including the assessment and reporting skills of the teachers.

A small number of residents are not able to return to their home community. Sometimes this is because they have no family or are unable to explain where they are from. A permanent home for a small number of learning disabled people is located near by. Polly worked closely with the workers and residents of this centre to develop a school focussing on social skills and creative activities to enhance the rehabilitation.

Polly has found her experience as a volunteer tremendously rewarding and recommends it to others. Occupational therapists are few and far between in Nigeria and she has been able to apply her skills on a daily basis as well as be involved in training others. Amaudo Itumbauzo is currently looking for volunteers to work with Project Comfort a Community Based Rehabilitation programme working with children with learning and developmental problems.

For more information please contact Amaudo UK on Tel: 020 8776 7363, E-mail: amaudouk@btconnect.com. If you are interested in volunteering (there is some financial support) please contact Christians Abroad Tel: 0870 770 7990 email recruitment@cabroad.org.uk; web site www.cabroad.org.uk



Okon, an Amaudo resident, making a broom to sell at market