

“Beyond Certificates and Statistics “

It's a common misconception that TEFL Volunteers are here to teach English. Some people say you could replace all the TEFL Volunteers with 25 well-trained specialists and they'd be partially right. At times it is difficult to justify our presence here in Ukraine. Explaining what we do is even more difficult because no two Volunteers share the same schedule, responsibilities, or skills, but here we are. When asked, we mumble something about teaching English but it's a cheap, easy answer that doesn't do justice to the service that we provide even if we can't describe it. We can mention that by the end of our service we hope to have taught this many hours and completed this many projects but truthfully, we are beyond statistics.

We come in waves, armed to the teeth with optimism and excitement, ready to change opinions and open minds. Some of us experience success and some of us fall short. We mark our victories with physical manifestations of our accomplishments here, grant materials, lesson plans and certificates for participation. Each object giving us the self esteem to say what we do is important and those certificates hang pinned to our wall demonstrating that we did something. However, there is no certificate for why we're really here. We are beyond certificates.

When I arrived at site I started an English club because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. We'd meet twice a week, play games and practice our English. At first my students were shy, not sure what to make of this bearded foreigner. I asked if they had any questions about America or me and they remained absolutely silent. We'd play games and once they got the hang of it, they loved guessing who the killer is in Mafia or trying to guess what celebrity is taped to the back of their shirt. For weeks we played these games until one day they started talking to me.

Ira told me about the dance class she and her sister attend, so I taught them about swing dancing. Roma said he liked the band Megadeath so I brought in my computer and I gave him all of my metal music. Sasha said she'd like to read the twilight series in English so I made a couple calls and now she has read the first one and will read the next one when she picks it up from the resource library I set up at my school. Each time they talked to me, I tried to pique their interest in English, American culture or the world. We talked about anything and everything until they started asking questions. They asked why I wasn't married and I told them I hadn't found someone I loved. They asked why I was here in Ukraine and I told them I wanted to see the world. They asked if I missed America and I told them I did but I also believed what I do here is important enough to be away from the people I love. These answers had never occurred to them before.

Then one day, Ira told me that instead of getting married after school, she'd like to be a professional dancer in America. Roma started saving up for a metal festival in Germany so that he can see a new country. Sasha is thinking about a career in journalism because lots of great authors started that way. There is no certificate for letting young girls know that they can be anything they want. There's no trophy for inspiring a metal fan to expand his mind through travel. There's no statistic for helping a young woman find the courage and confidence to do something she dreams of.

When people asked me what I would do in Ukraine, I said I would teach English because that's what I thought I would do. I realize now that I'm doing something else, something that can't be accomplished through a wire. I'm connecting people with a world they may not have known, showing

them a way to forge their own path by extending a hand. What's truly great is that every volunteer is doing this at their site, TEFL, YD, and CD. There is no good or bad Volunteer, no trophies, just people making personal connections and there's no specialist for that. There is no certificate or statistic that can quantify the impact of one enthusiastic, optimistic American. That's what I do, that's why I'm here and that's what my service means to me.