

## The Olive Branch – Report from a correct volunteer



Niko Winkel

**Volunteer Correct board member Niko Winkel travels through Tanzania. From there he writes about the projects that he visits. His goal: find good development project in which also volunteers from abroad play a role. He spent three weeks at The Olive Branch in Mbeya in the southwest of Tanzania. Read his fascinating report.**

A little over two weeks in Uyole, near Mbeya, in the far southwest of Tanzania, feels like more than a month. I have noticed it's mainly the accumulation of events and new impressions that make me feel time runs faster. But don't let this sound like a recommendation to live slow. Maybe my restless temperament drives me to want to have

more short and intense, rather than long and deep experiences. How much depth can I take, in the end? The Olive Branch for Children brought me as much depth as I can handle.

Deborah McCracken grew up in Toronto in a well-to-do family. Daddy was a corporate lawyer. When she was five she had her own horse. She went to the best schools and lived the easy life. After getting her degree at a prestigious university she left for Africa. She told me her first awareness breakthrough happened when she was 16 and spent a summer in a luxury exchange program in Durban, South-Africa. She saw township poverty for the first time, and realized she'd always just taken her luxury life for granted. So she went to Africa at her 23<sup>rd</sup>.



Deborah did not go back to Canada for two years. When she was away for one year, she told her parents: “I’m not coming back! I’m not gonna live in Canada anymore and I’m going to stay in Tanzania!” Deborah knew what she wanted to do: she wanted to build up her own organisation. “And I also want your help,” she said to her family. Here’s the start of The Olive Branch for Children. The charity is in Canada, the project organisation is in Tanzania. So it’s not about falling in love with a local Tanzanian guy (that came much later), it’s really her own aim to ‘make the difference’: Deborah’s wish to use all her skills and the facilities she could grab to live her life in Tanzania and bring forth a real contribution to community development in a very rural and far away area.



For sixteen days I was a part of the mega family The Olive Branch is. In Zion Home, an extensive compound she rents in Uyole, about 40 to 50 people live together. No, it’s not a hotel. It’s a real living community. What does it consist of? At first: there are 31 children, varying in age from 1 to 20. The eldest attends

university in Dodoma, the capital of Tanzania, but he's at home in Zion Home every holiday. A group of children attends secondary school (high school) and others are still in primary school and nursery school. The youngest still runs around in diapers. At the primary school, children also get some education from volunteers from abroad. Everybody speaks Swahili and English. In fact they're almost the only children in Uyole (and surroundings) that speak English.

All of these children are adopted by The Olive Branch for Children. Deborah is the official guardian of the children. For everybody she IS their mum. Not a second hand mum, but the only one they have.

Most of these children probably wouldn't be alive if they weren't adopted by The Olive Branch! Even during my stay there was a new case: a 12 year old girl that had lost everything. Even the official institutions in Uyole and Mbeya know where to find The Olive Branch in such cases. Yes, Deborah makes room for her. This girl arrived the day after I left. Last Sunday we did a hike with the whole family to a beautiful crater lake nearby (Lake Ngozi). Baraka, 13 years old, was there as well. He was walking slowly. Deborah told me his heart is bad and he has about one year left to live. He was already orphaned, living with his uncle, when he had severe breathing problems. His uncle brought him to the hospital and... disappeared. So there he was, left by his family, all alone, and Deborah got a phone call. With some better medication Baraka's health improved a little bit. Deborah tells me: we just give him the best last year he can get.

Deborah has got an overdose of energy. Every morning at 5.30am she goes through the medication schemes for all the children. Lots of them need some on a daily basis. Here in Tanzania one-and-a-half generation is completely gone because of aids (in many cases the parents of the children in The Olive Branch, who also passed the HIV on to them).

The Olive Branch for Children will have its own brand-new compound. The building process is already going on for several years. I didn't get a chance to see the proceedings myself, but when it's done the whole family will move there. It's about 25 kilometres away from Uyole. When I say 'the whole family', this also includes the 15 children that are in the annexe called

Peace Home. In Peace Home mama Edina takes care of the children, a wonderful Tanzanian lady. Deborah wants to have her own school accredited in the new Zion Home and give an even better base to the foundation.



I expect there to be some professionalization – to phrase it western style – in comparison to the stage of my experiences during the last couple of weeks. Here at Zion Home, being a volunteer, you dive deep into another world. No normal toilets, no shower: you pour cold water from a plastic cup. There is a shithole to use and to clean with

water from a bucket. The same bucket is at your disposal for having your shower. A smudgy plastic bag is on the ground to put your used toilet paper in. In the living room for the volunteers it's always noisy and crowded. Everybody leaves his stuff hanging around, even laptops, and all of the children drop by from time to time. I never had to lock any door. It's a family! There's also a nest with tiny little kittens in the cupboard. Their mother is often seen on the table, after most of the volunteers have had their ugali (maize porridge, the national food of Tanzania). Outside there are ladies (another part of the family: the household team) cooking in big pans on firewood, soup kitchen-like. Always beans and spinach to accompany the ugali. You eat what you get. Your luxurious food from your home country? Within a month you've totally forgotten about that. We don't live to eat. It's OK! (For a while).



Normally there aren't that much volunteers at The Olive Branch. In most months there are about 5 or 6, of which most stay for a quite long time. Often more than half a year. Also now. There's Cristina from Sicily, who is here already for 15 months. Her Swahili is fluent and she's coordinating lots of community

development projects. Just last week Lindsay from the US arrived. She will also stay here for a year. They really become a part of the family.

But during the weeks I'm here, it's crowded. Two groups of volunteers from Canada and Ireland. Students of 22 to 24 years old. They came as groups and they run well planned projects. Some are educating the children of The Olive Branch or run summer camps for them. Others participate in the community programs The Olive Branch set up. Their efforts are related to their skills, the experiences and their interests. It's all about added value.

Prior to my arrival, I asked Deborah about the costs for me to live and volunteer here for some weeks. In a mail she wrote me the costs would only be for food and accommodation: about 10 dollars a day. So a little bit more than nothing.

When I asked her for 'the bill', just a day before leaving, she told me (but of course I'm not allowed to generalize this): "Niko, please make up for yourself what you want to give. And if you have a specific target in mind to spend the money on, please tell me, because everything you leave behind will be put in one of our projects."



A couple of weeks before my arrival Deborah let me know (also by email) what project she had in mind for me. Last year The Olive Branch started a 'Food Support Program'. This program is sponsored by a Canadian rotary. It's about 5000 dollars, for a year. It's

Deborah's wish this program can be continued the coming years.

When I visit the supported people, interview them, take pictures and write stories about the interviews, the sponsors in Canada can have better insights as to what the project is about, and are able to form an idea about the way the people live their hard lives.

At the moment there are about 50 people in the Food Support Project. They get 5 kilos of beans, 10 kilos of maize, 5 eggs and a big bar of soap every month. You could say: who can live form that?! I found out for the majority of the people in the program it's not really an addition: it's most of what they have for a whole month.



Deborah introduced Bahati to me. He is my translator. (That's another part of The Olive Branch-family: the translators and assistants; boys and girls who do internships for their education. There is also a cosy sleep- and living room for them on the other end of the compound.) Bahati and I will be on tour for 8 days, to make the visits to the supported people.

We visit the people in faraway villages on the vast sandy and dusty plains with chains of mountains in the north and in the south. The villages don't seem to have any kind of infrastructure. Mud houses are built everywhere. Moored and dried mud, that's what it is.

Everything in the same beige colour. The soil, the houses and even the people, they all have the same colour. The houses are 'empty'. Some wooden stools are being brought in for us to sit on. The people themselves are mainly just sitting on the ground. Some plastic cans and buckets,



some pans, and some firewood are also on the ground. Often the air is thick of smoke and it's difficult to breathe normally. You see some vague food simmering in the pan resting on some bricks, some firewood below. The rest you see is undefinable, messy.

The times I looked behind the fabric hanging before the opening in the wall, just to look at the presumed bedroom, I also found 'nothing': an empty and airless room. Most people just

sleep on the ground. The old people with grooved faces, little boys with worn and torn down t-shirts with the names of famous football players on their back.



During the eight days we were on our path, frequently also on old ladies bicycles (with my knees against the steering wheel), we did 35 interviews. Almost without exception we heard heart-breaking stories. “How many children did you get?” They start thinking and counting on their fingers (their own age is unknown by them most

of the times) and they come out on an average of about 7. But only 1 or 2 are still alive! All those dead children! One-and-a-half generation has just disappeared: aids! It’s incredible. Grandchildren they still have, but the parents of those grandchildren: most of them have passed away. They take care of their orphaned grandchildren.

Besides this we meet people in all kinds of different situations of poverty, disabilities, lethargy, hunger, broken families, etc. etc. I go a long way taking pictures with my camera as well. I try to get rid of all restraint. It sometimes feels voyeuristic, but I believe I have to do it this way. It has to be an honest report: tell it like it is, show it like it is.



Also Deborah told me: one picture tells a thousand words. We are talking about misery here. In fact, Deborah also tells me, she finds me a great photographer! It’s the first time in my life someone gives me that credit. But I’m very happy with it. She is pleased with all the stories I am writing; she reads them almost every day. Of course I also think to myself: I

might just be the right person to do this project. Being 53 gives a somewhat different perspective than being 30 years younger: the age of all the other volunteers.

Indeed, I'm very happy, even grateful, with this project. I really dive deep into this and try to be as open minded as I can be; try to switch off every interpretation that automatically pops into my mind. Be pure, be curious. And be overwhelmed. There's no pro or con, no good or bad, no beautiful or ugly; it's just an indivisible and unstoppable stream of feelings and impressions.



Finally I had written my report, also filled with the best pictures I took, and it was about 82 pages long. Not ever before in my life I was this much pleased with something from my own head and heart; a pure and personal product. In only two weeks! So I'm very happy to be able to have it be shown to other people. Especially, of course, the sponsors that made the Food Support Program possible. Just yesterday I had my farewell meeting. Deborah prepared a speech for me. About 20 children danced and sang. Of course I couldn't keep it dry.

The Olive Branch for Children does not only focus on children. The Food Support Program is a good example of this. It's just got to do with the poorest of the poorest: the people who are genuinely the worst off and who don't fit in any kind of development program. It's about surviving and giving just that tiny little bit of comfort. Doris' grandmother gets food for Doris. She's 15 years old, working very hard to get the best final results on her primary school examination. Even during the holidays (right now) she goes to school every day to do extra exercise. The reason is: she really wants to proceed to secondary school. Of course there is the money problem: it will cost about 200.000TSH (100USD) a year. Money her grandmother does not have. They are completely depending on some kind of sponsorship. Yes, I told Deborah I know where I want my money to go to.



About 20 so called ‘Home Based Care’-providers (“HBC”, they are all called) are employed by The Olive Branch. They all represent a village or subvillage. They are the people to build the bridges. So the volunteer workers at The Olive Branch are mainly focused on a ‘teach the teacher’ way of educating. That’s all the better, because the people – the real target of the projects – could much better

get the right information from someone of their own village than from some ‘mzungu’ from a rich country. The education is about sexual hygiene, use of condoms, female cancers, proper use of HIV-medication, but also about alcohol abuse. The HBC don’t speak English, but they are ‘community leaders’ in their village. They have to take this role very seriously, but in many cases are not that well equipped for this task yet. It needs experience, decisiveness, perseverance and also some mental development. Or at least: a better understanding of each other. There is a cultural gap to close, also for The Olive Branch, being an organisation that wants and needs to get the results. Different styles of working, different styles of handling responsibilities.

Deborah asked me explicitly to keep this in mind when thinking about and formulating advices deriving from my interviews with the people in the Food Support Program. Often I could see with my own eyes that food support was appropriate, but maybe some other ways of support would be even more appropriate. It might be very beneficial for the HBC-providers to be more aware of this. In some cases, I saw old wheelchairs in the mud houses, rotting away, not being used for years. The disabled it belongs to cannot use it any longer. Maybe try to repair it and let someone else use it? Why is everybody cooking inside the house, surrounded by smoke? And complaining about coughs and respiratory problems? There’s no rainy season right now, tell them all to cook outside!

Are they solution-oriented in the best way? I think in many cases they lack the right focus on solution flexibility. Sometimes I think: why (the heck) don’t you come up with this solution

yourself? It's a little bit what we call 'thinking out of the box'. That's what these people need to learn. Yes, I do know there is something 'post-colonial' in this mzungu-'knowing better'. But again: it is what it is.



The Olive Branch for Children is genuine for the full 100%. The organisation is focused on the basic needs in this environment. There's nothing sacred or patronising in the way The Olive Branch is working; it gives space to all energy and every insight of the local people and

it focuses quite intensely on joy and pleasure: the aim of life is to have a good life. That is an important message, also for the Tanzanian people. Although projects aim towards the collective, in its core, the approach is very personal.

This counts the most, of course, for the children. Every night Deborah takes time to be together with them. In the big meeting room they all come together and do yoga, dance on R&B or African music, do seminar, debates, etc. The volunteers that are present are always also part of this big family.

“Listen good, my lovely children, you will be the heirs of The Olive Branch. You will be the community leaders of the future in this country. It are your uncles and aunts, your brothers and sisters, your tribe members, for whom we're all doing this.“

Deborah has found the right way, also to bring her own background subservient to her goals with this magnificent project. In the board of the Canadian charity her mother, brother and sister-in-law play an important role. The Olive Branch has a vast supportive network of volunteers in Canada. In Ireland and Germany, she also has good relations with universities that send volunteers, and with communities who support collectively. Altogether, the budget is about 250.000USD on a yearly basis. In Holland, where I come from, that is the financial budget for the needs of 2 to 5 disabled persons. I'm very happy a country like Holland has this collective insurance, this welfare state. But in Uyole there is a mini-society running on

this budget, consisting of at least 50 children, pulled out of the gutter, been given a loving family and being educated to real development in Tanzania. Not to speak about all the other projects aiming for real help to people in an area of 3200km<sup>2</sup> with 35000 inhabitants, many in the most faraway and poorest villages of the country.

Of course I will come back to The Olive Branch. I want to see how it develops. And if there's another beautiful project for me to be part of, that would be great.

*Besides board member of Volunteer Correct Niko Winkel is also entrepreneur with [GoTanzania](#), a web platform on which all volunteer work in Tanzania offering organisations are being benchmarked.*