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Summer of hard work in South Africa

Hampstead-based politics student Dominic Burbidge swapped NW3 for South Africa to help dig latrines in a deprived village. Here he describes how people from across the globe joined forces on the project.

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SOUTH Africa is like two different worlds which often meet but rarely on good terms. One is worried, friendly, yet dangerous, and, above

all, struggling to get by. The other can be seen on holiday advertisements in buses and trains. We went to the former and came back without a care for the latter.

I was one of a group of students from Netherhall House - a university hall of residence in London - taking part in a project to provide dignified sanitation facilities for the poorest of Mmakau, a rural town in northwest province.

Netherhall has been organising social projects to the Central American republic of Nicaragua since 2001. This year, the hall changed location to South Africa.

A question I am often asked is 'Was it hard?' - and, yes, it was. Meeting groups of villagers who had been promised our help knowing that we could not satisfy all their pressing needs was tough. And digging through the dry mud of Africa with

pickaxe and shovel was rough. But it was the sharing of smiles, jokes and songs that was really hard. Hard to leave.

The project in July involved the construction of 25 latrines over two weeks through the combined efforts of students and young professionals from different countries as well as the locals of the village. Ten people came from Netherhall for the project and we were joined by two more from Italy, two from Kenya and five from South Africa. The greatest mobilisation, however, was inspiring the large numbers of people in the village to help themselves.

Graham Smith, from Leeds, was impressed by how much "the locals took the lead". He said: "We sometimes have the idea that Africa is down-and-out but they were extremely motivated. All they needed was an injection of outside help. We

were the catalyst and even the kids helped out."

Our normal routine involved getting up by 6am to arrive early for work. We finished at about 5:30pm each day, having travelled to the different sites to dig holes and build toilet structures.

"People here are a bit surprised by the group," said Success, a young girl from Mmakau who helped with the project. "It is not at all usual that you have people coming from abroad to build toilets."

For many of us, the highlight of the project was the completion of the latrines in the houses of the locals. One of my workmates on the trip, Alvaro, said to me: "One of the best moments was completing the latrine for a man in a wheelchair. When you speak to the people, you see how much they value what we have done."

I asked Alvaro whether he would embark on the same kind of project next year and he responded enthusiastically. "Yes, the first year is always the most difficult. I would love to extend the project to other things as well as the latrine building. I know the village needs a new classroom for the kids and this could be the next project. This year we were just trying to find our feet and, by doing so, we've found there is a lot more work to be done in Mmakau."

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