

**“I’d heard about the gang violence,** stabbings and drugs before I took the job as an Australian volunteer working for the AFL in South Africa. I’d been warned about the dangers of living and working in black townships. I would be the only white person living in Hazeldean and working in nearby Nyanga, the so-called murder capital of South Africa, where, it was whispered, white people had been attacked and raped. I wasn’t afraid. I was wary because of the stories I’d heard but I was determined to go with an open mind. I didn’t want fear to affect my experience.

“I work in four townships and travel by car between them and my home. As the Australian Football development officer for AFL South Africa (a subsidiary of AFL Australia) my role is to set up and facilitate school and community-based football competitions with the view of developing a sustainable football league in the Western Cape. A large part of the reason the AFL has a presence in South Africa is to provide recreation opportunities for young people who have little or no access to organised sport. Working in poor townships and rural areas was a logical choice.

“A sense of being responsible for others, of doing a job that made a difference to people’s lives, was instilled in me from a young age. My mother was very socially aware; a diplomat who was always helping those around her. Before working in tourism my father had been an archaeologist and when I finished school, I took up his line of work, studying archaeology and anthropology. After obtaining my PhD at La Trobe University I got work as an archaeology consultant conducting heritage studies on the Mitcham-Frankston freeway. Although I was working in my chosen profession, I found the corporate world dull and soul-destroying.

“Moving to South Africa was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I was interested in working abroad as a volunteer and saw the position of Australian Football development officer advertised on the Australian Volunteers International website. Though I hadn’t grown up with football – I was born in Kenya – when I migrated to Australia, I learnt to play footy and quickly fell in love with the game. As a child I’d always preferred sport to study, concentrating my efforts on athletics, netball and hockey. Football was just as athletic, allowed contact and was nothing like anything I’d played before. I played for the North Heidelberg Bulldogs and then the Heidelberg Tigers. I played at least eight hours of footy a week.

“When I moved to South Africa, I became AFL South Africa’s fifth employee. AFL South Africa’s headquarters are in North West Province, in Potchefstroom. Township newspapers announced my arrival and listed my mobile phone number. I got phone calls from children wanting to get involved and requests from mothers to help them

get their kids out of gangs and off drugs. Many of the township kids are malnourished and left unattended, with parents battling alcoholism and poverty. They live in shacks in dangerous areas and have to walk long distances to get to school. They play with rocks and old tyres. Few own balls but they’re keen and curious to explore anything new. They want to be involved.

“There are no recreational options for these kids. Sport is not part of the curriculum in South Africa and most township schools don’t have sports grounds or facilities. Parents can’t afford school uniforms and books, let alone sports gear, so the children that come to my clinics either play in their school shoes or barefoot. I had one kid play in a pair of slippers.

“They wear jumpers donated by Australian clubs, with the tops falling below their knees. The children tuck them into their shorts because they want to play in them so badly. We have to collect them at the end of each match so the next group playing can wear them.

“Last September, I moved to Cape Town. I moved in with an African host family: Mbuyie Hlomela, a maths and science teacher and her 12-year-old daughter, Tandiswa. The house has electricity and water, and I have my own room, which is lucky. Before I settled in Hazeldean I was put up by various families while travelling between townships and cities. Often I had to sleep in the same bed as my hosts.

“I came with few possessions and have learnt not to flaunt what I do have. Australian Volunteers International suggests volunteers keep a low profile in terms of wealth or possessions. I’m not being paid for what I do, but I don’t need much – I don’t have to pay for accommodation and I eat with Mbuyie. My small stipend from Australian Volunteers covers my basic necessities and the occasional night out with friends. When we go out, we go off to a braai, a sort of butcher where you select your meat and then they marinate it and cook it for you and you sit around and have a few drinks. I don’t mix with white South Africans much; the majority of my friends are township people. The white people I have met don’t understand what I do and why I do it. They’re horrified by the idea of living in townships.

“I miss my old friends and my home in North Fitzroy. I’ll definitely return to Melbourne. I get a taste of home every now and then when I tear open a package sent over from friends. They send Australian things like tinned hams and Vegemite. Aussie Rules is in my blood and I miss it. I miss going to the footy and playing footy on a Sunday afternoon with mates and sitting around afterwards having a few drinks. I miss the vibe and atmosphere of Fitzroy and going for coffee on Brunswick Street.

“Still, if I’ve changed the life of one kid or altered the path he or she may have been on, I’ll return home happy.”



Allison Simons, 32, went from North Fitzroy to South Africa, where she works for the AFL promoting football.

Interview Suzy Zail  
Photography Johann van Tonder





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