

Helping at Puy Batard

I wanted to write this article after reading a plea by Jean-Pierre requesting volunteers at Puy Batard this Christmas. I first read an article in the Creuse News regarding Puy Batard back in 2007. It seemed like a good opportunity to learn French, help the handicapped and get to know a little about the French way of life, as I had not been living in France very long.

Jean-Pierre and Chantal invited me to their home, where I was treated to a lovely meal. It was all very relaxed. They asked me about myself, it was neither an interrogation nor did I feel it to be an interview. We discussed the needs of the handicapped and Jean-Pierre showed me the facilities that were available to them, the kitchen, the lounge, the bedrooms and the shower rooms. I was then asked if I would be interested and able to help. My worries that my French was not very good and that I did not have any qualifications were unfounded so I was pleased that I could volunteer my services.

The first morning as I drove there I wondered what on earth I had let myself in for and nearly turned the car around and went home. When I arrived I was introduced to the other volunteers and some of the handicapped people who were having breakfast. I had to explain that my French was not that good and I had taken a dictionary with me just in case. After breakfast I assisted in helping to wash and dress the handicapped people, make the beds and generally tidy up. Before the communal lunch there was time to sit and talk with everyone.

Driving home that night I was surprised I did not end up at Lyons as my head was spinning from listening to French, helping out and trying to speak French with my limited vocabulary. All I can say is that I felt as though I had achieved something very special and wanted to go again, everyone had been helpful and patient with me.

From then on I began to learn the routine. After breakfast we would sit and talk, help prepare the midday meal with Chantal, then each afternoon Jean-Pierre would plan an outing. We would go for a walk round the lake at Guéret or go swimming when the weather was hot, go to an animal farm, go shopping or take a walk through the woods.

It has been a very exciting adventure for me and my confidence in speaking French has grown. I have to say there were difficult and tiring times, but there was always someone around to help. The other volunteers, of all ages, were helpful and considerate. I even began to understand French jokes.

If you are considering helping but are not sure, I would encourage you to speak with Jean-Pierre and Chantal, they are just as willing to help you and make it as pleasurable for you as possible.

Jean Whitlam

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