

# Emily's Volunteering Story

*BELGIUM & MEXICO 2023*



WCIA has been sending young people on international exchanges since the 1970's. We believe that there is no better way for a young person to develop key skills and competencies, as well as gaining invaluable citizenship skills, than to undertake an exchange, get out of their comfort zone and do something truly life changing.

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We believe that everyone in Wales should have the opportunity to volunteer abroad, to develop as a global citizen and contribute to a fairer and more peaceful World in a safe environment.

This is Emily, a Psychology Student from Swansea University. This year she decided to do something truly outstanding and out of her comfort zone. With support from the Academi Heddwch and WCIA and funding from the Welsh government funded programme Taith, Emily took the plunge and undertook on a week long placement in Brussels in May, taking part in the Flemish Peace Institute annual Peace Conference. Emily and her fellow volunteers learnt about the history of peace making in Belgium and the EU as well as created interactive content for the Peace Institute.

Not content with one amazing project, Emily decided to see just where volunteering could take her!

She took up a second placement over summer in Mexico in which she assisted with our partner Viva Mexico's Sea Turtle Conservation project. A project that saw her assisting with the conservation of Sea Turtle nests, cleaning the beach and releasing Sea Turtles back into the wild, as well as planting trees to improve the area's resilience to climate change.

*“Emily was a gregarious individual with a real interest in people and their stories. From the moment we started on our adventure to Belgium, she asked incisive questions and listened empathetically to their experiences. In our time working with the peace institute, she was keen to understand the details of conflict and peaceful negotiation, and her thoughtful approach allowed her to build relationships with different groups of people within the discussion.”*

*Amber Demetrius - Head of Global Learning  
WCIA & Group leader in Belgium*

## What Emily Enjoyed Most

*[in Brussels] Many discussions about what we had heard and learnt amongst ourselves. I think the Quakers house certainly made an impact on the way that I think as they had a really peaceful approach to peace building*

*[In Mexico] I really enjoyed the night patrols where we got to see the adult turtles come onto the beach to lay their nests. A highlight for me was when I managed to turtle track all on my own and find the nest, that was definitely a proud moment. I also really enjoyed releasing the baby turtles at sunset!*

*I gained a new appreciation for beach cleaning, that was something I found very rewarding. Especially when we would come back to the same beach and it would be a lot cleaner, it was also a nice experience chatting with the other volunteers.*

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## Taith and International Exchange

*2022/23 was the first year that young people in Wales could take up international exchange opportunities through Taith.*

*Taith is a Welsh Government scheme aimed at bringing Wales to the World and the World to Wales. Every young person who lives in Wales, aged between 16-25, regardless of their background or where they live are able to take up an international exchange through Taith.*





## A typical Day Volunteering in Belgium

We visited different institutions such as Welsh house, the Quakers house, EU parliament, Flemish parliament and the peace conference, learning from them about what they are doing.

It was a great opportunity to develop my cross-cultural understanding and learn more about peace and conflict from experts. As a psychology student this is massively interesting for me to not only learn about the findings of the research but also how it was conducted.

## A Typical Day Volunteering in Mexico

This placement was for Sea Turtle Conservation. Tasks changed day by day, we would usually find out in the morning as it would largely depend on the amount of nests found the night before. The day would usually consist of planting nests and then a general activity for the day which would often be beach cleaning and releasing baby turtles

has really highlighted the importance of animal conservation but also environmental conservation and how the two are so tightly integrated. It has given me a new respect and appreciation for the environment/ planet and the creatures that call it home. This volunteering has really made me mindful of the waste that I personally create and I have started to make changes in my own life that are more sustainable.



## How the Placement Impacted Emily

I think that the most important thing I learned is to not make assumptions about people, how to hold a respectful discussion when not everybody agrees with one another and that peace starts within oneself.

Other than that, I gained a new awareness of other cultures - not only Mexico but I also learnt through the other volunteers about their own culture and the countries they are from.



## Why Choose Volunteering?

I really value learning and volunteering internationally really immerses you in a new, learning environment; with adopting the technical knowledge and skills for the placement you're on and also personally by having to adapt to a completely new culture and way of living.

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## What's next for Emily?

I do think this has greatly impacted my future plans. Although the goals are not clear, I feel that this experience has highlighted my values in regards to the environment and I would like to be open-minded about opportunities to continue to make a positive impact in that regard

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WCIA are really thankful to the team at Academi Heddwch, The Flemish Peace Institute and Viva Mexico for organising such a transformative experiences for the young people, including Emily. For Emily at least, it inspired a new perspective on life and a desire to experience more of the world through international voluntary work. It's testament to programmes like Taith, that in allowing young people from Wales to experience the world and contribute to a project that enables the creation of a new generation of ethically informed citizens of Wales and the World.

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If you've been inspired by Emily's story, or know a young person who could benefit from international volunteering experience, check out our other volunteering opportunities which can be found [here](#) ,or email us on [volunteer@wcia.org.uk](mailto:volunteer@wcia.org.uk)