

Family volunteer trips require ample preparation

By Jennifer Conlin, New York Times

Like many affluent parents, Carolyn Everson, an executive at Facebook who lives in Montclair, N.J., with her husband and 9-year-old twins, is committed to raising “socially conscious” children, as she puts it. For that reason she did not hesitate to sign her family up for a trip to Kenya last August with Me to We, a company that offers what its Web site calls “transformative trips.” At a cost of \$4,195 per person (excluding international airfare), guests spend 10 days immersed in African culture while participating in community development programs and living in “rustic, luxury cottages.”

In Kenya, Everson’s family carried jugs of water on their backs alongside tribal women, and helped build a school. They learned beading, planted trees and listened to lectures over leisurely dinners.

In Everson’s view, the trip was a success. “My daughters are growing up in a very privileged town,” she said. “This trip was a chance for us, as a family, to play a global role in helping others while also expanding our worldview.”

Travel – “fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness” in the words of Mark Twain – has long been a way to broaden one’s perspective. What is changing, at least for some parents, is the kind of trip that offers such broadening. A decade ago it was enough to peer into the Grand Canyon or bike through Tuscany. Now, galvanized by disasters like Hurricane Katrina and 9/11, and aware of the insulating effects of wealth, many parents are using travel to deliver to their children potent doses of real life.

Some parents, particularly those who are doctors or educators

with a toehold in a foreign community, design family volunteer trips themselves. Others are signing on to organizations like Me to We, a partner company of the children's rights charity Free the Children. And while it is hard to miss the incongruity in spending thousands of dollars to inoculate children against the scourge of privilege, traveling abroad costs money, period; for families with limited time and a desire to help, these organizations fill an obvious need. Me to We has seen family participation double over the last few years, while Globe Aware, which offers trips to 15 countries, had a 100 percent increase in the number of families signing up from 2003 to 2008. More recently, that number jumped 22 percent in the first half of 2012 compared with the same period last year. Chris Clum, executive director of Experience Mission, which arranges Christian mission trips around the world, estimates that 50 percent of the 3,000 to 4,000 volunteers who travel with his 10-year-old organization each year are now families.

Not surprisingly, the effects of children's involvement in service travel are showing up in areas like education. "Everyone in admissions started seeing essays about these volunteering trips six or seven years ago," said Bev Taylor, the founder of the Ivy Coach, a New York-based college admissions counseling service. "Now we have to tell kids not to write about them."

Though that is unlikely to dampen interest, keep in mind that such trips can be more complicated than the brochures suggest. Below are some common questions with answers collected from families who have taken such trips, and experts who are aware of the risks and rewards.

Read the whole story