



**University law graduate Kate Owen originally volunteered with Raleigh in Costa Rica and Nicaragua in 2005 before starting a training contract with Herbert Smith. Kate then returned as a Project Manager on the charity's expedition in India in autumn 2009.**

I'd originally come across Raleigh in the press and liked what I saw on the website and what I heard from Raleigh staff, so applied to join. I'd decided to take six months out before starting a training contract at Herbert Smith and wanted to do something a little different where I'd get the chance to learn new hard and soft skills and give something back. I studied A-level Spanish at school so Costa Rica and Nicaragua was an obvious fit. Herbert Smith very kindly gave me a small bursary to contribute towards my fundraising target because they felt it was a constructive way to spend my time out.

I wanted to get the chance to meet new people, do different things, see a part of the world I would not otherwise see, gain leadership and teamwork skills, improve my Spanish and make a difference.

What attracted me to Raleigh was its outstanding reputation as a youth development organisation.

During one expedition phase I spent three weeks in a small hamlet where our project aim was to build 19 rainwater harvesting tanks to provide a safe water supply for the community during the dry season. It was a magical three weeks; the team integrated into the community extremely quickly, working on the tanks between 9.00am and 4.00pm, tea breaks involved being welcomed into people's homes for succulent fruit, mouth-watering fish curry and refreshing chai on a regular basis.

After work we dived into the local reservoir for water polo, a wash and swimming, played cricket with the local children (wandering cows routinely stopped play!), taught English and enjoyed the chance to build relationships in a world completely different from our own. We slept on the floor of the local school which allowed us to learn more about the education system and get to know the local children with whom we rapidly became firm favourites. The team atmosphere was fantastic; we became a very strong group in a short space of time, thrown together by the beauty and magic of one of the most stunning places imaginable. The world of law text books and mock trials seemed a million miles away, it was an ideal place to reflect on the end of one part of my life and the beginning of another.

One of my best moments was finishing the trek; we had trekked 220km through pouring rain, blistering sun, over mountains, through valleys, conquered both dense jungle and endless plantation trails to reach a mind blowing beach, which was all ours for 24 hours. I remember looking at my teammates as we watched an amazing purple sunset over the beach and reflecting on the struggles both mental and physical that we had conquered with the help of each other to get there. Another moment was the party that the village threw to celebrate finishing our rainwater tanks where every member of my team was in tears when asked to reflect on what the three weeks meant for them, an emotion shared by the members of the community who also spoke. It was a humbling and immensely touching occasion.

**One of my most challenging days was during my environmental expedition phase when we were living in the depths of the jungle. I was day leader that day which involved taking charge of every aspect of the running of the day. We got a call at about 7am on the radio to warn that a major storm was about to hit our area and we**

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**had to move our low-lying camp to higher ground or it would flood. I had to organise the moving of 13 people and all our equipment to the top of a hill 2km away. We had to move everything by hand because we were so deep in the jungle that transport could not help us. As much as this was a very challenging day it was also very good experience because I learnt to cope with the unexpected, to be flexible and adaptable, to motivate the people around me, keep calm under pressure and appreciate the importance of retaining a sense of humour in adversity. All useful skills for City law!**

What I learnt on Raleigh would have taken me five years to learn outside of Raleigh. I learnt the importance of team work, taking the initiative, supporting members of my team, anticipating problems before they arise and communicating clearly. I learnt the importance of having a positive mindset and the effect that this can have on a flagging team. I also gained a greater appreciation of the difficulties that many people face just a short journey away which has enabled me to have a greater sense of perspective on some of the trivial problems that we moan about on a daily basis.

After my expedition with Raleigh in Costa Rica, I completed a training contract at Herbert Smith, sitting in litigation, corporate, the advocacy unit and restructuring and insolvency. I qualified into corporate where I practiced for over a year before taking voluntary redundancy. I then volunteered with Raleigh as a project manager for six months in India. On my return I got a job with a leading volunteering charity, CSV, finding projects for corporate clients. In my free time I volunteer with Raleigh, a youth sailing charity and several local conservation charities.

**Raleigh was absolutely invaluable for starting my training contract. Coming after law school and before my training contract, it was an ideal forum for making the transition between student life and the working world. The skills I learnt were directly transferrable, leadership, communication, teamwork and strength in adversity, were required on a daily basis. When you are trekking through the jungle with 12 other people and you are all cold, wet, hungry and aching you have to find a way to meet your objective in the same way as when you are leading a due diligence exercise and 12 hours before exchange the other side drop 300 documents on you which have to be reviewed in order for signing to take place on time. Those types of qualities can only be learnt through experience and expedition puts you through those experiences in a safe and supported manner time and again. I couldn't help but notice that many of the personal qualities measured in trainee appraisals; confidence, communication, leadership, teamwork, motivation, drive and determination, were the type that were required on Raleigh on a daily basis.**

Unquestionably my outlook on life has changed since volunteering with Raleigh. I am far more confident as result of being tested in physically and mentally demanding situations and knowing that I can cope with them. I am far more pro-active and confident in taking the lead in situations because that is what I learnt to do on expedition. I am also more aware of people who are less fortunate than I am and regularly volunteer in my local community. Most law firms have strong community action programmes and Herbert Smith was no exception. I was actively involved in a project which involved teaching Spanish to local GCSE students every fortnight which was hugely rewarding.

**Raleigh was hugely formative for me. It came at exactly the right time, my mind wasn't cluttered with case names and statutes and I had a training contract lined up so I could focus on making the most of the experience. It's hard to imagine that digging trenches in the middle of the jungle or helping to build a safe water supply could be the perfect finishing school for a law student but it is. Law firms take it as a**

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given that their incoming trainees are bright, what sets the good ones apart are their interpersonal skills and life experience and I firmly believe that there is no better way of gaining this than Raleigh.

