TAKING A BREAK

Not all families have the luxury of a yearly holiday, but that doesn't mean their kids have to miss out. Edmund Rice Camps work to provide a holiday experience for all children, and ACU business students are helping them out, Caitlin Ganter writes.

For many of us, fond memories of holidays was part of a childhood blur. But for some, these memories would never be possible without a little help. Enter the Edmund Rice Camps, a holiday experience for young people who would otherwise be unlikely to have one.

Edmund Rice Camps provide recreational camp programs during school holidays for children, young people, and families experiencing disadvantage. Young adults volunteer as 'Big Buddies' and are matched with a child for the week to be their mentor, positive role model, and friend.

While many of the young people come from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds, in some instances the camps also provide respite for parents and families.

ACU Bachelor of Marketing students Caitlin Gordon and Ella McHaffy are both big buddies.

Caitlin, who took part in the program last year, said it was a remarkable experience.

"As part of my business degree, we're required to complete 150 hours of community engagement volunteer placement. I chose to complete my hours at Edmund Rice Camps because I really wanted to help make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children.

"I think it was definitely worthwhile volunteering at Edmund Rice: Working with the children was a very rewarding experience, and seeing them so happy made it all worthwhile.

"My role was to supervise the children at all times, and help organise and plan the weekly schedules. We were also given the opportunity to organise and run activities throughout the week.

"We did lots of games and sport, as well as arts and crafts, and went on trips to the beach for a swim on the hot days. Going to the beach was my favourite experience. It was such a fun day with the kids."

For Caitlin, the most memorable part of her week was seeing the children relax.

"When they first arrived at the camp, everyone was quite shy and timid, but one was very confident about talking to the leaders. By the end of the week, all of the kids had opened up. You could really get to know their individual personalities, and we created such memorable bonds with them."

"It was a fantastic experience, and saying goodbye was a real challenge, especially because some of the kids got quite emotional when they had to leave."

"It was amazing to see how such a small amount of my time could potentially influence another person's life. It really opened my eyes to aspects of everyday life for some people, and the fact that others may not be as fortunate as we have been.

Ella will soon be attending her first camp.

"I am so excited but also a little nervous... although I think that's to be expected. I have already been to the training day and it looks like a great program to be a part of."

"Being around children has always been fun for me, and I have always wanted to volunteer to help them. This degree was the push I needed in the right direction to get me started, I think it's great that community engagement is incorporated into the degree, because it opens our eyes to another aspect of life. Volunteering is a fantastic way to make you appreciate what you have and be more generous with helping others.

"I'm going to be a great experience. I'm finding my studies interesting, fun and challenging at times. I feel really getting prepared for the future, and of course the extracurricular activities are making university a great social experience.

"I'm hoping at the camp I can contribute a little something to a child's life. That's what I'm aiming for. I just want to make sure they forget all their worries, relax, have fun and get to be a real child for a few days."