



Hairdresser to plasterer

■ For six years Valerie Finnegan Cahill has travelled to South Africa to volunteer – this year, she tells Jane McNamara, she has a new skill

THIS weekend, Ballyvolane native Valerie Finnegan Cahill heads to South Africa once again with the charity Mellon Educate.

But this year, the hair salon owner, will travel to the township of Masiphumelele with a new skill set – to work as a plasterer.

Val, who lives in Blackrock, has been volunteering with the charity for six years.

The mum-of-two who runs Ikon Hair design on Oliver Plunkett Street said: “The charity has changed a lot over the past couple of years. We no longer build houses in the townships in South Africa. Instead we build schools and are called Mellon Educate.

“We go to very impoverished areas. First we do the infrastructure, which is building the school, then the second part of the charity is to work a structure around the school and have a mentoring programme. They get an area that has a 10% or less chance of kids passing into secondary school and they bring it up to a 75% pass rate. That can take up to three years.

“Really what we do, building the school, is just the tip of the iceberg. It is what happens afterwards with the mentoring programme which makes such a huge difference with those kids.”

Last year the group went to a place called Kokstad on the Eastern Cape. This year they will visit Masiphumelele, a township about 40 minutes outside Capetown, where 40,000 people live.

The school they will be working on was originally intended for 800 kids - but it has more than double that.

“There are now 1,650 children attending that school, so you can imagine how that works!”

Valerie explained how she became involved with Mellon Educate.

“When I turned 40 I decided I didn’t want a party but I did want

to mark it in some way. Around the same time I saw Niall Mellon on the *Late Late Show* talking about his charity and it sounded like something I would be really interested in, so I went for it.

“This is my sixth year now going to Africa. For the first two years I was a team leader with my younger sister Niamh. The two of us were in charge of a group of 70. There were 50 Irish volunteers and 20 South Africans. It was excellent.

“The groups are divided between labourers and tradespeople. Because of the responsibilities I have running my own salon, I felt I wanted to do something a bit different so I worked with various teams, such as the carpentry team. Last year I was a labourer and for the very first year ever I am now going over as a tradesperson. I worked with the plasterers last year and towards the end of the trip I worked with them on the scaffolding and they taught me plastering. It was brilliant, just fantastic. The plastering over there is totally different to here. It wouldn’t be as precise, but it is still brilliant.

“Any kind of hard work really is what you want. I just want to get in there and work, work, work for the day and just fall into the bus.

“Every year we have to raise €4,000 to get there. A percentage of that will cover getting there and staying, and the rest will go towards the build. We will be there for one week.”

Valerie is married and has two sons, Finn and Jack.

“My two boys, bless them, are forever being reminded as to how lucky we are here. You nearly have to have that conversation with yourself before you come back.

“I remember the first time I came back I found it difficult, for example, when my boys wouldn’t finish their dinner. You actually have to stop yourself. If you start

comparing, you will only become unsettled.

“You can only be happy with the fact that you have made some difference and you just have to put that to bed until next year when you can make a difference again. I have learned to never take anything for granted. Our quality of life here is so special. Doing this work really grounds you and makes you appreciate everything you have from running water to basic human rights.

“Equally, going on the trip you make so many fantastic friends. It is like a huge family that go over every year and it’s that aspect of it as well that makes it so fantastic.

“I suppose it’s like every charity, the people make it. We all have the same goals and mindset.”

Val will be joined by her sister Niamh Finnegan Terry on the trip again this year. The sisters were full of praise for family, friends and clients who have supported them in their fundraising efforts, in particular Donna Manion in the Clarion Hotel and Gary O’Donovan and team from O’Donovan Off Licence, who helped them host two fundraising Wine and Cheese Extravaganzas. Traders along Oliver Plunkett Street also gave spot prizes and attended.

Val added: “McQuillan’s Tools, also on Oliver Plunkett Street, every year give me something to take with me on my trip, this year I was given a Trowel & Hawk to help with my plastering.”



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Val Finnegan Cahill above, and top right with her sister Niamh Finnegan Terry. Right: Val with other volunteers in South Africa on a building trip.



