



Volunteering at Gunung Children's Refuge

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Solo, Indonesia

by Ken To



precious friendship

My 10 weeks volunteering at Gunungan Children's Refuge were a fulfilling and thoroughly enjoyable experience. I had a fabulous time with the children there, teaching and playing with them. It was the moment when I had to leave that I began to realise how close the children and I had become. The 10 weeks passed in a blink of an eye. I left Solo not only with an abundance of splendid memories, but also with a heart filled with gratification and inspiration.



The children at the refuge are truly adorable. Amongst all 18 of them are mostly teenagers and a few younger kids. There is a mix of personalities. Some are outgoing; some seem to be quiet. Some are more caring than others. Some possess a great sense of humour. There are brilliant students; yet there are also few who do not do so well at school.



Despite their different personalities, there is one thing in common. There is always a smile on their face. They are the most cheerful young people I have ever met. Their friendliness and sincerity come straight from the heart.



I was always awed by their energy and enthusiasm. During my stay in Solo, the children did their best to make me feel at home, from serving me food (which they should not), talking with me, to getting my help on their homework and teaching me to sing and dance.

They talked with me not only about their studies, their friends and their hobbies, but also their dreams.

They are as close as brothers and sisters in a big family. Living in the most basic conditions, they help and support one another. They never take the opportunity to live at the refuge and to go to school for granted; instead, they appreciate even the little things in life which people may often neglect.

During the 10 weeks, I was the children's language teacher, but at the same time, I learnt a great deal from each and every one of them, and indeed, the impact on me will be ever-lasting.

teaching english, and chinese



At the beginning I planned to teach English only. From my previous volunteering experience, I understand how important yet difficult the English language is to students in Indonesia. I ought to make use of my knowledge and experience to help the children at the refuge to improve their language ability.

One day a thought came to my mind – why not teach them Chinese, too? Recent years have seen a surging trend of people around the world learning Chinese as a second language. In fact, the Chinese language has even been included as part of the curriculum by a number of schools across Indonesia. Although I did not have any experience in teaching Chinese in Indonesia, I was confident that I could do it, and make it fun.

The first thing I did was to give each of the children a Chinese name. The Chinese names were created according to the sound of their Indonesian names, and the meanings of each Chinese character were explained in an easy-to-understand manner. At first many found it strange and difficult to pronounce – let alone remember – their newly given names. But by the end of the first class, they already started calling one another by their new names, in Chinese!



Throughout the months, I taught the children to read and write basic Chinese characters and practised simple conversation with them. Visual and audio tools were used to make things easier and more interesting to them. I did not force them to remember a specific amount of words or phrases, so as not to stress them out too much.



In the meantime, the English classes were conducted with a series of games and interactive activities, including Pictionary, Silly Sentences and some other exercises I specifically designed for them. This is quite a contrary to the common approach of learning English in Indonesia – which puts a much heavier focus on grammar than usage in general. Students may find it difficult to express themselves in English even after years of learning. Worse still, they may find it stressful to learn the language.

The good news was, my students enjoyed the activities I brought to them so much that they kept asking for more. My intention was to let them know that language learning should not be just for exams – learning languages can be fun and enjoyable. Also I wanted them to understand how important it is to widen their horizons and obtain knowledge of the world's different cultures.

They were fast learners. In fact, I was the one who got the most excited when the students showed they understood or could even use a word or two which they had just learned. The sense of satisfaction was beyond description.

an inspiring experience



This was the first time I worked with such a large group of teenagers for such a long period of time. Caring for teenagers, indeed, can be very different from that for younger children. No longer little kids, yet not yet full adults, teenagers in particular need people to listen to them as well as care for them as they start finding direction in life. It is an opportune time to develop their interests, skills and talents, while building self-confidence.

To learn to think from different perspectives is important. I often used my hometown Hong Kong as an example. What is Hong Kong to them? From what they saw in the mass media, many think Hong Kong is simply a rich city where everyone lives extravagantly. I explained to them that this is not entirely the case; the reality is there are also a lot of people leading very difficult and stressful lives, and not unlike any other cities, Hong Kong has its own social problems, too. I shared with them my personal experience of growing up in a humble family, plus my belief in the importance of knowledge, hoping to inspire them to work hard for their future.



Apart from the children, I also greatly enjoyed the time with the staff of the organisation. Weekly team meetings were conducted in Indonesian. At first, it was quite a challenge for me to fully understand what was being discussed, but the team was patient and did not mind spending extra time to make things clear for me. Thanks to that, my Indonesian has improved significantly. Besides, I had the chance to assist with tasks such as writing activity reports and updating the organisation's website, through which I gained a better understanding of the overall operations of the organisation.



Talk with the people in Solo and one can easily feel their pride in the fascinating Javanese culture – from the legendary song *Bengawan Solo* to the stunning art of *batik*. To me, the charm of Solo lies in its people who are renowned for their politeness and friendliness. In Indonesia, there is an abundance of volunteering opportunities in major cities such as Jakarta and Bali, or places affected by natural disasters like Aceh. Solo may not be at the top of the travel list. That said, Solo is an ideal place to indulge in the authentic Javanese tradition, and to make friends with its truly great people.



I felt honoured to have the opportunity to volunteer at Gunungan Children's Refuge. I always believe, through volunteering, not only can we reach out and help others, but it is also an excellent way to reflect and improve ourselves.

My experience at Gunungan Children's Refuge was one of the most rewarding and memorable volunteering experiences I have ever had.

To everyone at Gunungan Children's Refuge – thank you all for the friendship and all the beautiful moments we shared together. Do your best in whatever you do, follow your dreams, and most importantly, always be a good and happy person.

About Yayasan Gunungan Orphanage & Relief Centre

Founded in 2006 in Solo, Central Java, Indonesia, Yayasan Gunungan provides a range of social services to various target groups within the local community.

For orphaned and neglected children, Yayasan Gunungan runs a Children's Refuge in the city centre providing them with a safe and loving home, together with a variety of extra-curricula activities. Plans are underway to hopefully build and relocate to a small Children's Village in the countryside just outside the city. A rehabilitation centre called "Sehati", or "One Heart", has also been established for young women and children who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking and abuse to help rebuild their lives. In addition, Yayasan Gunungan also runs a Charity Shop in Solo, which sells items donated free by local businesses, to help raise funds for the organisation's activities, while providing training and employment opportunities to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

With these initiatives, Yayasan Gunungan is dedicated to supporting and educating those suffering the worst hardship and distress, by giving them opportunities to enhance their lives and thereby help themselves.





Wish to Help?

If you wish to help the children in Indonesia by making donations or volunteering like what I just did, please visit Yayasan Gunungan's website www.gunungan.org.

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