

What Makes You Happy?

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“Min Se Teu accidentally drank acid. Now he can't eat or go to school” with those words my volunteer club was begun.

One of my students asked a friend of mine who is a Burmese refugee, “What Makes you happy?”. My friend told the story of how she likes helping people. She told them about a little boy who is a Burmese refugee living in Thailand and how he drank acid that he thought was water. He needed operations, but nobody could help him.

My students were transfixed by the call and horrified by the situation. They were baffled that nobody could help him. They decided they would. We had a car wash and a bake sale. We raised enough money to pay for his operations. Now he goes to school and has a normal life.

Formal Club Begins

Since everyone benefited from and enjoyed the project, I decided we should make a formal club. We elected leaders and they decided to do more fundraisers and to help local people.

We have weekly meetings to discuss our fundraisers which we have a few times a year. Our most popular fundraiser is “No Uniform Day”. Students can wear their normal clothes for a small fee and we sell snacks. Some teachers, including me, wear student uniforms. MBC TV heard about “No Uniform Day” and did an eight minute segment on our club.

We have movie night at least 4 times a year. We charge a nominal admission fee and prepare snacks which we sell. Students have taken over the the responsibility for movie night and I just supervise. It has given the students a good opportunity to develop their leadership skills.

Last year we had a Thanksgiving fundraiser. We prepared a traditional American Thanksgiving dinner for 100. Much to my surprise, nobody got sick and everyone enjoyed themselves. We had movie night on the same day and raised over 1,000,000 won.

Children

The club has helped three more children who are Burmese refugees. We bought anti-convulsion medicine for a paralyzed little girl for the last two years. We paid for an eye operation for another little girl who was abandoned by her parents then blinded in one eye when she was struck by a rock. We paid for a Cat Scan and therapy for a little orphan boy.

The stories of these children are compelling and teach our students about the world in a very personal way. Just as importantly, our students are not spectators watching children suffer. They are active participants in solving problems. It changes their character in important ways.

Disabled People

For the last three years in most months the volunteer club has helped local disabled people. The people we help are always very excited to see us and greet us warmly.

Dozens of students have been transformed by the experience. They arrive full of trepidation. Some students are actually shaking and can't speak to the disabled people. The work includes judging games, being the arms for those who do not have them, and sometimes just playing

with (and generally losing to) the people. At snack time, the students help feed them. Inevitably the students begin to laugh with the people and enjoy their experience. They no longer see them as some alien species to be feared, repelled by or felt sorry for. They see them as people. It is very powerful in its simplicity and changes our students' character.

Senior Citizens

For the past few months, we have been going to a local nursing home. The students feed the senior citizens and help clean. For many students it is a new and emotional experience and some even cry. A student recently said, "This really makes me think about the rest of my life." I have even become friendly with a couple of the men.

Dog Walks

We have assisted in walking dogs at an animal shelter. A couple of students who had great fears of dogs participated because their friends participated. One girl was even deathly afraid of a cute little puppy! She decided she did not want to walk a dog, but joined us for the walk. Slowly she got over her fear and I gave her my dog to walk. The changes in most of the students were not that dramatic, but it did raise awareness of animal welfare in Korea.

Impacts

The volunteer club has had an impact on multiple levels.

The children we have helped have seen their lives improved, some dramatically. In addition, our students have a much deeper understanding of the problems that children in developing countries face. They have also learned that they have an ability to change the world.

Volunteering with the handicapped people has had an amazing impact on our students. All the students have gotten over their fears and prejudices. Some have made friends with those we help. One student change her career plans after working with the disabled people.

The final impact on our students has been on their leadership skills. Students lead the club and different activities. One girl, who called herself shy and a coward, began leading meetings and last month I asked her to stand up and translate something that I was saying to almost 200 students. She did it without hesitation and with confidence.

My classes have really improved due to the volunteer club. I have found that students in general have more respect for me because I try to help others and the students in the volunteer club are generally the most active in the classes.

Challenges

Doing all these events creates a lot of extra work and stress for me and sometimes my colleagues. It is frustrating because we are working with teens, and sometimes they are not reliable. In addition, communication can be a challenge when trying to coordinate everything.

I have found that the most important things are patience and clear communication. When everyone knows we are working towards the same goals, it is easy to get past the frustrations.

Final Thoughts

I have volunteered overseas for years and plan to continue to doing it after leaving Korea. Sharing this experience with my students has not only been wonderful for them, but also made my life much more fulfilling. The pleasure I get from the volunteer club far exceeds anything else I have experienced in Korea.



Handicapped Volunteer Group



Fund Raisers



Children We Helped



Helping Senior Citizens



Volunteering with Animals