

## Tu Fengmei Learns How To Tell the Stories of Life

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
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"In Tzu Chi, you must take the initiative to look for your own tasks or offer to help others with theirs -- otherwise you won't have anything to do!" Tu Fengmei heard these words 10 years ago -- and they remain engraved in her memory.

The occasion was a group meeting deep in the woods in the late autumn of 2002: team leader Suan Jinying said the words to everyone while the groups were being finalized. Each team had volunteers, but no one showed interest in the 'Reporting Team'. Without hesitation, Fengmei said: "I'll sign up for this then!" She did not even know what a computer looked like; that night, when she returned home, she could not help but reveal the news of her decision to her family.

"Oh my! You don't know anything, yet you dare to sign up for this job?" said her husband – he did not hesitate to be blunt.

"Who said I can't do anything? I just don't know how to do 'this' and 'that'. They are only two things!" Fengmei's answer made everyone laugh hysterically; but, inside herself, she was overwhelmed by anxiety. If she was suddenly assigned administrative work, what would she do? With her strong will and her enthusiasm to challenge herself, she decided to start from scratch.

### **A desire to learn means letting go of pride**

"What kind of basics class is this? He speaks so fast, it's impossible to catch up!" The first computer class was a huge obstacle for Fengmei; all 30 students were middle school and high school students who were quick, enthusiastic learners. She was the only one to drop out of the class on the first day. "I just won't accept that I cannot do this!" Because of her spirit of never giving up, she transferred to the beginner's class. With less stress, she quickly got the hang of it.



She managed to learn the skills. But, when she was assigned to type up documents for work, the real challenge began. She could not find the phonetic symbols; one document took two to three days to complete using just two fingers. Later she wrote by hand then asked her children to help her type it into the computer. She spent three to four hours writing a passage; the children finished typing it in around 10 minutes. Another challenge came in 2003 with the establishment of the documentation team, which consisted of reporting, photography and taking video.

Each reporting of an event was a challenge because everyone was a novice. Fengmei wrote reports as if they were essays and took pictures erratically using a point-and-shoot camera. The results were images of telegraph poles, lamp posts above a person's head or crooked, swaying

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buildings: and sometimes there were mere shadows – proof of her chagrin. In order to do better, she started from the most rudimentary level of photography. In a short semester, she diligently took pictures with her point-and-shoot camera. When her teacher saw her first submitted composition, he exclaimed: “what on earth are you taking pictures of?” By the end of the semester, he praised her, saying: “this picture is not bad at all!” She realized that, if you want to learn something, you must first let go of your own pride.

### A good role model inspires good results

At the time of the expansion in 2006, there were very few volunteers in the Documentation Team in the Shulin district. There was no video operator in the team; there was only Mr. Zhuo, the photographer. He is skillful in taking pictures; at every event you could see him. He is pro-active in taking responsibilities, is happy to co-operate with others and always gives selflessly. He is a role model for the other volunteers in the Documentation Team. He was also the person chosen for the 2006 New Year Blessing video. In order to portray his story accurately, Fengmei started to observe him from different perspectives.

One late autumn morning, Fengmei was heading towards the Shulin Railway Station. The street was empty; only the steam drifting from the bun shop carried a trace of warmth. There was still some time before the departure of the train, but Mr. Zhuo was already waiting on the platform with his camera. He was going to the Tzu Chi Hospital Taipei Branch. His thin figure looked lonely on the platform. As an express train rushed by, Mr. Zhuo took two steps back and ran his hands through his grey, wind-blown hair. He took a look at his watch, adjusted the camera bag on his shoulder, looked at the incoming train and continued waiting. Looking at the silhouette of this Bodhisattva on the platform, Fengmei felt pain in her heart; she thought to herself: “it must be hard for an old man like him! I should shoulder more responsibilities.” Fengmei frequently visits Mr. Zhuo to improve her photography techniques; she hopes that one day she will be able to take extraordinary shots.



### To tell a story, think first

As the person responsible for the Documentation Team, Fengmei demands of herself modest improvements in her volunteering each year. She started by writing reports and learning photography after a brief reflection of her experiences. She has documented numerous events in her nine years as a Tzu Chi volunteer. The most moving and unforgettable experiences were the relief efforts for Typhoon Morakot and the 2011 winter relief distribution in Fuding City, Fujian Province, China. The sick and the poor sitting in dilapidated houses and quietly accepting their fate left a vivid image in her memory. The care of the Tzu Chi volunteers and the deep love of old couples who smiled through their tears became apparent, as they sat in their small homes. Fengmei was so touched by the events that she almost forgot her primary responsibility as a photographer.

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Elsewhere, in Fuding City, almost 170 doctors and nurses were holding free clinics as part of the Tzu Chi relief effort. Capturing the key moments was a particular challenge for Fengmei, as there were only two volunteers in charge of taking photos and writing reports. Rather than conduct interviews immediately, Fengmei decided to get a grasp of the overall situation first. But she struggled to find a focus for her reports after she realized that the sickness of every patient and the compassion of every medical volunteer were of equal value.

She decided to interview those who turned from being helped to helping others. At the beginning, the medical staff were assigned to participate in the free clinics. Over time, however, some had a change of heart and started registering to help out at the free clinics willingly and enthusiastically. Fengmei started constructing her article from the stories of these few medical volunteers who transformed their hearts. As for the images, the first was of an old man who had a tumor on the back of his neck. At first, he did not know what to do and wept helplessly as he told others about his condition. The next showed how he was brought to seek medical advice under the care and guidance of a Tzu Chi volunteer. The last image of the complete recording was of the old man's beaming smile.

### **What she loves most in the Documentation Team**

"Motivation stems from stress. To expect a result and then expect perfection is an encouragement for beginners, but I would never again use that as an excuse." Even for events held on non-holidays, Fengmei occupies herself with paperwork and photography. In order to avoid imperfect reporting, she demands herself to do everything step-by-step. She would rather do one or two things perfectly than finish everything sloppily.

"Ah Mei, are you skipping the retreat for other activities again?" Throughout the year, due to photography class outings, Fengmei was unable to attend some activities. Her friends teased her about it but she simply smiled. In her heart, she knows she will carry on the path she has chosen in her beloved Documentation Team. No matter what happens, she will never leave it. When she encounters difficulties in writing and photography, she remains composed and finds ways to motivate herself, recharge and start again.

By Tu Fengmei

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