

A Stream in the Desert

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Friday, 26 March 2010 16:18



We are all religious people, whether Catholics, Muslims, or Buddhists. Mercy guides all of us in the pursuit of life's wisdom.

--Abu Tomas [Moslem]

Life weighs heavily on my shoulders. Happily, my sadness and anxiety dissipate as soon as I listen to the Master's speeches.

During a distribution of daily necessities, I was surrounded by children chanting "Abeer! Abeer!"

Their smiles made my day.

--Abeer Aglan M. Madanat [Catholic]

The rolling sand dunes in the vast desert of the Middle East have long been the setting for many epic stories and films about the Arab world. A classic example is Arabian Nights. Generations of readers have spent countless happy hours traversing that part of the world through these stories. Readers enjoy vicarious excitement as their imagination rides side-by-side with Ali Baba, Aladdin, and the Genie. Who hasn't dreamed of taking a ride on a magical flying carpet that carries one to fairyland and beyond?



However, reality on the ground for those that live in the desert is quite a different story. The harsh and trying environment is a constant challenge for desert dwellers. They would gladly trade all the literary beauty and fantasy of the desert for some food to make their daily lives a bit easier.

The Tzu Chi Jordan branch was founded in Amman, Jordan, in 1997. Since the beginning, volunteers have worked tirelessly to help disadvantaged desert residents. After a decade of cultivation, new seeds have sprouted in Jordan.

At the end of 2007, two native Jordanian volunteers, Abeer Aglan M. Madanat and Abu Tomas, traveled halfway around the world to the Tzu Chi headquarters in Hualien, eastern Taiwan, to be certified as a [Tzu Chi commissioner](#) and a [Tzu Cheng Faith Corps](#) member respectively. They were the first Jordanians ever to earn these distinctions. Tzu Chi's efforts in Jordan have reached a new landmark.

Abeer says that poverty, drought and famine in Jordan lead people to despair. Long-term solicitous care from Tzu Chi volunteers brings love to those who are suffering.

"We help the poor understand that we care about them and their situation," Abu explains, drawing from his years of experience as a Tzu Chi volunteer. He speaks in English with a distinct Middle Eastern accent.

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"Small but fully functional" accurately describes the Tzu Chi Jordan branch. There are only six commissioners and Tzu Cheng Faith Corps members, including the recently commissioned Abeer and Abu. These six, along with four regular volunteers, form the core of the Tzu Chi Jordan branch. About 30 benefactors also donate regularly to the branch, but they are otherwise not as involved in Tzu Chi work as the core group. Although it's fairly small compared to other branches, the Jordan branch makes steady strides in carrying out the Tzu Chi missions for those living in the barren desert.



Crisscrossing the sand dunes

Jordan is home to many world-famous scenic sites. The Jordan River, the sacred site where Jesus Christ was baptized, attracts tourists and pilgrims by the thousands from around the world. Another example is the Dead Sea, which borders western Jordan. The Dead Sea is not an actual sea, but a very salty lake; in fact, it is the deepest hypersaline lake and the second saltiest body of water in the world. With a salinity of 30 percent, it is about 8.6 times saltier than the ocean. Amazingly, because of the high salinity, a person can lie still on the water without any flotation aids and read a book or enjoy the sun.

Unlike many other countries in the region, Jordan has no oil of its own. Its resources are limited to phosphates and agricultural products. In 2006, the country had a per capita gross national income of only US\$2,500 per year. The economy depends largely on services, tourism and foreign aid.

When tourists visit Jordan, they often see only the famous sites advertised in their brochures. What they don't often see are the many Bedouin tribesmen struggling to eke out a living in the desert. Their stark living conditions form a sad contrast with those of the affluent tourists, who may only occasionally notice the tribesmen for a photo opportunity. The Bedouin people face constant challenges to their very survival. They must cope with excruciating heat in the summer, severe cold in winter, and live always without running water or electricity.



In addition to the poor, Jordan also has an ample supply of refugees who have fled from neighboring countries experiencing political instability or natural disasters.

Abu Tomas has followed the example of Chen Qiu-hua (陳秋華), head of the Tzu Chi Jordan branch, in taking care of some of the poor and the refugees. Chen and Abu have worked together for seven years. Chen is deeply touched by Abu's unquestioning willingness to go with him to do Tzu Chi work.

Once, Chen asked Abu if he would be willing to go to Iran to join other Tzu Chi volunteers from

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Turkey and Taiwan and distribute rice to earthquake victims. Abu accepted the invitation without a moment's hesitation. They hopped a ride aboard a regularly scheduled Royal Jordanian cargo plane bound for Iran. This helped save on travel expenses, but it was none too comfortable. For four and a half hours, they were crammed in the cargo bay. It was freezing and extremely loud. After a most trying flight, they finally arrived in Iran and joined the rest of the Tzu Chi distribution delegation. When all was said and done, the discomfort was worth it. The group accomplished exactly what they had set out to do for the quake victims.

"Abu is such a devoted friend," said Chen of his friend and colleague. Little could Abu imagine when he first started with Tzu Chi that he would one day be so deeply and joyfully involved.



Chen first arrived in Jordan in 1974. Prior to his arrival there, he had a seventh-degree black belt in Taekwondo and was a combat instructor for Taiwan's military elite, the marines. In 1974, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense sent him to Jordan to serve as the head martial arts coach for the Royal Guards. Chen's modesty, sincerity, honor and integrity won the respect of His Majesty Hussein Ibn Talal and His Highness Crown Prince El Hassan Bin Talal, who both requested his services as their personal trainer.

Chen next served as the head coach for the Jordanian Taekwondo national team. His team took home Jordan's first Olympic medal, a bronze, from the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. The country went wild over the honor, and the team went on to win more medals in other international competitions.

Abu remembers hearing about Chen as a teenager: "I heard much about Chen Qiu-hua when I was just 13. Later, I sent my son to study Taekwondo in his dojo. My son told me that Teacher Chen was doing charity work." Abu's pride for his son Tamer is clearly evident in his voice. Not long ago, Tamer attended the 11th Pan Arab Games in Egypt and returned to Jordan with a gold medal.

While Tamer studied Taekwondo at Chen's dojo, Abu followed Chen about to see how he performed his charity work. At first, he assumed that Tzu Chi was just another charity organization. But his view changed completely in 2002 at a refugee camp in Jericho, in the northern Gaza Strip.

At the distribution, Tzu Chi volunteers distributed 23 wheelchairs they had purchased for people with diminished mobility. One elderly man cried as he received his wheelchair. "I have crawled on the ground for five years. I have five children, but none of them ever bought me a wheelchair. I never expected foreigners would be the ones to help me out in the end." The old man's tears shocked Abu, who suddenly realized the significance of Tzu Chi's charity work. He made a promise to Chen then and there: "Beginning today, I am a Tzu Chi volunteer!"

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[Tzu Chi Quarterly](#)