

One in Every Nightstand

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Thursday, 26 September 2013 14:28



A few words of wisdom may help relieve stress for a traveler fatigued by a long journey on the highway—or on the path of life. To that end, Tzu Chi volunteers in the United States have visited close to a thousand hotels since 2011, trying to put a complimentary copy of *Jing Si Aphorisms* in every guestroom. They have given out 37,000 copies.

One Monday morning, Tzu Chi volunteers walked into Hotel Chino Hills in Chino, California. It was the fourth hotel they had visited that morning. They were on a mission to provide free copies of *Jing Si Aphorisms* to hotels and motels for their guest rooms. This book is a collection of short sayings from Master Cheng Yen, the founder of Tzu Chi. The volunteers were giving out a multilingual edition printed in Chinese, English, Japanese, and Spanish.

Unfortunately, they had not experienced any success on their book giving mission so far this day. This hotel did not seem very receptive either. A woman stepped out from behind the counter to meet them, and she looked very solemn.

No matter the reception they received, all the volunteers could do was take a deep breath and make their pitch. They told her about the ideals of Tzu Chi and the purpose of their visit, all in one breath. Unexpectedly the woman, whose name was Michi Schultz, smiled and agreed to accept their offer.

Schultz and the volunteers read a verse from the book: “Every single day of your life is like a blank page in a diary. Every person you meet, every event you participate in, is a living essay.” In just a few moments, the atmosphere in the lobby changed from tense and solemn to cordial and welcoming.

There were 99 guestrooms at Hotel Chino Hills, and Schultz agreed to place a copy of the book in the nightstand of each room. She also showed the volunteers one of the rooms. The volunteers happily thanked her for her receptiveness. They snapped some group photos before saying their farewells, and then headed to the next hotel to try their luck again.

Do your best, and accept what comes of it.

This movement of putting *Jing Si Aphorisms* in hotel rooms originated in 2011, when Gao Guo feng (高國豐), a businessman in southern California, traveled to Taiwan on a business trip. He read the *Jing Si Aphorisms* he found in his hotel room there, and he was deeply touched. Upon returning to the United States, he contacted Tzu Chi volunteers and said he wanted to donate 5,000 copies of that book to be distributed to hotels and motels. He hoped that they could serve the same function as the bibles which are often placed in American hotel rooms to help travelers soothe their minds.

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The Taiwan Hotel and Motel Association of Southern California held an exposition in June 2011. Liu Sheng ping (劉勝平), a director of the association, rented a booth at the expo for Tzu Chi volunteers to promote Jing Si Aphorisms, thus kick ing off the drive to get the book into hotels.

By the end of the expo, 60 hotels had agreed to put copies of the book in their guestrooms. After that, many people followed Gao's example and purchased more copies for the drive.

Tzu Chi volunteers in New York, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., and Texas have also been involved in the project. They have visited hotels and motels in those areas and offered copies of Jing Si Aphorisms for their guestrooms.

Excellent though the book is, getting hotels to accept it is difficult. There always seems to be one obstacle after another. Volunteers were often told on their visits: "We're just front desk personnel, and we don't make decisions as to what goes into the rooms," "Nothing religious," "We must follow the rules of the franchiser," or "Our company prohibits the display of publications other than our own brochures."



Sometimes volunteers visited a dozen hotels without success; at other times, they might find eight out of ten hotels they visited receptive to their pitch, and they would give out more than 500 copies in a single day.

Yang Cong ming (楊恭明) and Su Mei juan (蘇美娟) recalled that they used to call their targeted hotels ahead of time, "but we got turned down ten times out of ten tries." In response, the volunteers changed tactics and began visiting hotels directly. "When I open the book and ask the hotel personnel to read a verse from it, they often feel the power of it. The book is the best spokesperson for itself."

It was inevitable for volunteers who visited hotel after hotel to feel pressure at the prospect of being repeatedly turned down. Their fear of rejection was understandable. But they pressed on because they had all benefited from the teachings of Jing Si Aphorisms. The book does not contain lengthy, profound theories on Buddhism, but inspiring, terse sayings on how to live. The volunteers believed that hotel guests could benefit from the teachings as they themselves had, and though their path was by no means smooth, that hope gave them strength to call on one hotel after another.

Volunteer Wu Qin yi (吳勤宜) is from Fremont, just north of San Jose, California. She said that she had hesitated about participating in the undertaking, afraid that her English was not fluent enough. Explaining the aphorisms to strangers and promoting the book to them in a foreign language was a frightening prospect. But she joined in any way because she believed that someone might gain renewed confidence in life by reading some verse or other in the book.

One of the aphorisms in the book says, "Do your best, and accept what comes of it." With this

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advice from the Master, volunteers can face rejections with more composure and keep going.

Don't underestimate yourself, for human beings have unlimited potential.

One day, volunteers entered a motel in Gilroy, "the garlic capital of the world," south east of the San Francisco Bay Area. Soni Patel, the newly appointed manager of the motel, bluntly told them that the establishment was but a transit stop for druggies and scum, implying that they might not be the best audience for the books.

The volunteers suggested that sharing the good thoughts in the book with people on the fringe of society might be even more worth while. To their delight, Patel agreed to try the books out, and he even referred the volunteers to a few more motels nearby. He gave detailed directions to those places, and he told the volunteers that he would call ahead of them to inform the other hotels that "A group of Tzu Chi volunteers would deliver good books to them."

Driving north on U.S. Route 101 north of San Francisco, the volunteers arrived at Windsor, located in Sonoma County, the largest producer of California's Wine Country region. The manager of a hotel there accepted 20 copies of Jing Si Aphorisms from volunteers. She browsed one of the copies and smiled at the aphorisms that met her eyes: "Don't underestimate yourself, for human beings have unlimited potential," and "With confidence, perseverance, and courage, nothing is impossible." She smiled because those sayings happened to resonate with her mood at the moment.

Further north, the volunteers reached Ukiah, the seat of Mendocino County. Near this small town is the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, an international Buddhist community and monastery. Of the 13,000 residents in Ukiah, fewer than 30 are Asian Americans. Zhang Ji Yu (张吉宇) is the Tzu Chi contact person in the town. He told the volunteers that few people there had ever heard of Tzu Chi, which might be more recognized in his neck of the woods by the homeless who had received aid from the foundation.

There were 18 motels in Ukiah, nine out of ten owned by people originally from India. Business was slow due to the prevailing economic recession, and occupancy was dismal. When volunteers walked into one of the motels, the proprietor brightened up momentarily, thinking that he was getting some business. He was extremely disappointed when he found that he was wrong.

The volunteers patiently explained to the proprietor the purpose of their visit. They said that people had purchased copies of Jing Si Aphorisms to be given to establishments just like his, all free of charge. "Free" seemed to be the only word in their presentation that urged him to listen on.



Volunteer Zhang Ji Yu told him about Tzu Chi's routine aid distributions in the town. Then the

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volunteers listened attentively to the owner as he spilled his worry over the gloomy prospect his industry was facing. They gave him warm words to cheer him up, and he seemed to feel better.

In all, the volunteers successfully distributed the Aphorisms books to 15 motels in Ukiah.

In late June 2013, volunteers braved a heat wave and went back to motels in Modesto, east of San Jose, that they had previously visited. Some guests had taken the Aphorisms books with them when they checked out, and the volunteers went to replenish the supplies. They gave out a total of 325 copies.

Roger Patel, the proprietor at Hacienda Inn, told the volunteers that he himself had read the aphorisms. The one that he liked the most was: “A person with a generous heart and compassion for all living beings leads the most blessed life.” He told the volunteers that he would make a point of asking his cleaning staff to put the books beside the lamps so they would be conspicuous and inviting.

In San Jose, inn manager Mitesh Patel, third from left, and visiting Tzu Chi volunteers all hold copies of Jing Si Aphorisms.

If we can reduce our desires, there is nothing really worth getting upset about.

There are 350 hotels and motels of all shapes and sizes in Las Vegas, Nevada. Many of the largest hotel, casino, and resort properties on the globe are located on the Las Vegas Strip. Many smaller properties also vie for a piece of the action. It is estimated that there are more than 140,000 guestrooms in Las Vegas.

With so many potential destinations for Jing Si Aphorisms, Tzu Chi volunteers in Las Vegas thought it would not be too hard to give out the free books when they first kicked off the project. Many of the properties that they visited gave them rather encouraging signals at first, and their staff asked volunteers to come back to them later. However, when the volunteers did, they could not reach the hotel personnel in any way. Those people became unreachable by phone or e mail, or they simply refused to meet with volunteers already on their premises.

A hotel manager confided in private to the volunteers that the real reason his company had declined Tzu Chi’s offer of free books was purely a matter of dollars and cents—not of acquiring the book, but of maintenance. Though the books are free of charge, their upkeep is not. If the hotel agreed to feature the book in its guestrooms, it would need to set aside a storage space for the inventory of the book, its housekeeping staff would need to check each time they cleaned a room to see if the book was still in the night stand, and an employee would need to push a cart of new books to restock the guestrooms as needed. All this activity would cost the hotel \$4,000 every three months. These extra expenses would not sit well with the management.

Another reason that the volunteers’ effort met with no success may have been the result of the special hotel culture in the area. Due to the gambling in Las Vegas, hotels and motels have quite different characteristics than establishments elsewhere. For example, one day in March

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2013, volunteers walked into a motel, explained the purpose of their visit, and handed over a copy of Jing Si Aphorisms to the person working at the front desk. He shot right back: “We’ve got tenants here, not guests. They’re not people of faith. In fact, some of them take their bad luck out on the Bible—they tear it up. Nobody’s going to look at your book.”

The volunteers refused to be ruffled, however. Instead, they became more resolved to advocate the book—if for nothing else than that they wanted to counter the potential damage of gambling in the city.

The total annual revenue in Las Vegas from gambling rose to 6.5 billion dollars in 2012, a 15 percent increase over 2011. This was in spite of a weak economy. Perhaps the more shaky the economy, the more people seek to make a killing by gambling.

There is at least one problem with gambling: Once started, a gambler usually has a hard time quitting. If she has a hot hand, why quit? If he has lost money, he has even less incentive to quit because he wants to win it back and then some.

Gambling is so addictive that it can cause social problems. Xu Kun guo (徐昆国), a Tzu Chi volunteer in Oakland, was once addicted to gambling. He had been so entangled in the game and the tantalizing promise of winning that he would forgo everything else. In fact, he was once injured on his job because his mind was so absorbed in gambling.

Now that he has managed to quit, he wants to help others kick the addiction. That desire to help the helpless has propelled him to take repeated rejections with composure and to keep inviting hoteliers to place the Aphorisms in their guestrooms. He has faith that the book can exert a positive impact on some gamblers.

Carol O’Hare, executive director of the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling, said that she was deeply touched by a verse in the book: “If we can reduce our desires, there is nothing really worth getting upset about.” She herself was once a compulsive gambler who lost her job and her house. “If I had read this book 26 years ago, I wouldn’t have done those dumb things, and wouldn’t have had to suffer through those painful days.”

In March and April 2013, volunteers called on 27 hotels and motels in Las Vegas, and they convinced 19 of them to accept the books. They plan to recruit American husbands of Tzu Chi volunteers to join the project. They hope to remove language barriers that may have diminished the effectiveness of the volunteers, who are not native English speakers.



Feedback

Though the path of the project has been strewn with difficulties and rejections, it has not been without bright spots either.

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Boston volunteers received a phone call one day in April from a Christian woman. She said she had traveled to California the week before. In her hotel room there, she saw a book that was filled with maxims of wisdom. Through an Internet link printed in that book, she found the phone number of the Boston office and called to inquire about purchasing the book. After the call, she drove one and a half hours to buy four copies of *Jing Si Aphorisms* from the Boston office for her sisters.

Fontaine Inn in San Jose has put the book in each of its 62 guestrooms, and it is using the book to train its employees. “Each morning, I pick out one aphorism from the book and write it on the white board in English and Spanish for all employees to read,” said manager Mitesh Patel. “That sort of orients our mindsets toward positive thinking before we start the day. It’s worked pretty well for us.”

Volunteers regularly call establishments that received the books from them to check on the books and to share the latest about Tzu Chi events. When necessary, they return to the establishments to replenish the books.

They placed some copies at a motel in Fremont in early 2013. The proprietor was very happy to receive a follow up phone call from a Tzu Chi volunteer. He said that his guests responded well to the book and many had requested to keep them. “I identify with the core message conveyed by those aphorisms—many issues in life can be resolved ‘starting from one’s mindset,’” he said. “I often urge my guests and staff to read an aphorism each day from the book to help themselves cultivate a positive attitude.”

From June 2011 to July 2013, volunteers visited 972 hotels or motels in the United States, and 409 of them accepted more than 37,000 free copies of *Jing Si Aphorisms*. Volunteer Li Jing Yi (李晶怡), who has long helped promote Tzu Chi publications in the States, implores more volunteers to join in this long term undertaking by contributing books, even just one copy, talking to hotel personnel about the project, or putting the book in their own hotels or motels. Any one of these simple actions could help change someone’s life.

“I would consider the project a worthwhile effort even if the book influences just one out of ten thousand recipients,” said Gao Guo feng, whose donation of 5,000 copies kicked off the project, and who has continued to donate more copies.

The volunteers involved in the project have a long road ahead of them—there are, after all, more than five million hotel rooms in the United States. But the length of their path does not daunt them. The next time you stay at a hotel, remember to look for a copy of *Jing Si Aphorisms* in your room. When you have read it, share it with others. It may set in motion an ever widening ripple of goodness.

By United States Documenting Volunteers

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