

Providing What They Need

Written by Fay Chou

Thursday, 17 October 2013 19:03



"I was lazy. I loved to watch TV. I didn't exercise. And I didn't help around the house." That was before. Now, Lisa has changed. She is friendlier toward others. She helps her mom around the house. She no longer talks back to her teachers. Elsewhere in her class, Fanny says of her classmates, "We often argue, but now we understand everyone is special in his or her own way." Such is the fruition of Tzu Chi's character education program in Lytle Creek Elementary School.

Tzu Chi volunteers first started serving the San Bernardino community many years ago by providing free medical clinic outreaches, book donations, winter relief distributions, and family care. Since the free clinics were often held at Lytle Creek Elementary, then-principal Edwin Gomez had a chance to witness firsthand the warm care of Tzu Chi volunteers as they served the community.

Wishing to instill that same selfless spirit in his own students, he asked Tzu Chi volunteers to start teaching biweekly character education lessons at his school.

When the program first started in 2006, there were only six Tzu Chi volunteers involved. They often gathered at volunteer Diana Mu's house and brainstormed until they could not think anymore. They would go to her house after work and labor late into the night to make props that could be used to teach gratitude, respect, and love. They started with first and second graders and accompanied these students as they advanced through elementary school. By the summer of 2013, some students had received Tzu Chi's character education for six straight years, building a strong moral foundation for the rest of their lives.

Creating a Positive Environment

San Bernardino is the second-poorest city in the whole country behind only Detroit. The students who attend Lytle Creek live in one of the poorest areas in San Bernardino, in the shadow of a power plant surrounded by barbed wire and prone to occasional loud explosions. Due to its poverty, the city is dangerously crimeridden and violent.



Feeling deserted and forgotten, in the early days local residents often responded to Tzu Chi's free clinic events with surprise and disbelief. "Why are you here?" they asked. But those who received medical care became familiar with Tzu Chi. Maria had attended Tzu Chi's free clinic three times in the past, and was anxiously awaiting the next one. After receiving so much help, she thanked the volunteers profusely, saying, "You take such good care of me. You are wonderful people, really nice, so nice!"

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All of Maria's children go to Lytle Creek. "My youngest son tells me, 'Those Chinese ladies are so adorable.' When the kids come to the class, they are just amazingly nice to them." Because of Tzu Chi's classes, her children have begun to change. "Now they take their plates to clean after dinner and brush their teeth without my having to remind them."

With so many temptations in poor communities like San Bernardino, Lytle Creek teachers asked Tzu Chi to design lesson plans specifically geared at teaching children how to resist temptations.

In addition to teaching the children how to protect themselves, not to trust people blindly, and not to go off with strangers, the volunteers designed age-appropriate monthly themes to encourage positive behavior and strengthen the children's sense of responsibility. For instance, the first graders were taught how to take care of themselves. The second graders learned about common courtesy, the fourth graders about taking responsibility, and the sixth graders about giving.

As school teachers have schedules to keep and goals to meet, some were a little reluctant at first to give up forty minutes of class time for a character education lesson. However, when the students started becoming calmer and more polite while also improving academically, their teachers discovered that they actually had more time for class management. Therefore, other teachers began asking Tzu Chi volunteers to go teach in their classes as well, and parents told the school that they wanted their children to attend Tzu Chi's classes. When other schools heard about these positive results, they also requested this service from Tzu Chi. Unfortunately, though the interest is there and the results are positive, it is difficult to find enough qualified teachers able to volunteer during the school day, so this program has not yet been able to expand to meet all these needs.

Since 2012, one other Southern California public school has also begun to enjoy Tzu Chi's character education: Charles H. Lee Elementary in Azusa. In addition to regular classes every other week, Tzu Chi volunteers teach character education in school-wide assemblies twice a year. Second-grade teacher JoAnn Chiles said, "The story of Tzu Chi's bamboo bank era and the video about Tzu Chi's relief efforts after Hurricane Sandy opened the kids' minds and hearts. Now the kids are a lot more caring."

Although not officially part of the character education program, second graders of Ekstrand Elementary in San Dimas, California, received a full-day environmental protection lesson on March 28, 2013, when they learned how to make compost. Tzu Chi volunteers presented a compost bin to the school that day and brought twenty-four buckets of compost for the kids to use on their small vegetable gardens. Principal Lucinda Newton greatly appreciated Tzu Chi's work with their students: "The more you know and understand about the world, the more you will know how to take care of it and coexist with it."

On the last day of school in 2013, one of Lytle Creek's character education classes was assigned to clean the cafeteria walls, while the other class was tasked with cleaning up the playground for the kindergarteners. The lesson focused on "giving." It showed the children that even though they are young, they can still give and help others. They happily tore down old

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posters and announcements from the walls in the cafeteria and had a ball picking up trash, wiping down picnic tables and chairs, cleaning up the slide, and sweeping sand back into the sandbox. For the first time, they understood the joy of doing something meaningful together. "Teamwork! Teamwork! Teamwork!" they shouted as they shook hands and hugged one another after their hard work. "How do you feel?" Tzu Chi volunteers asked. "Great!" "It feels good to help people!" "We should do this more often!"



Taking Their Lessons Home

Even when surrounding neighborhoods are violent, schools like Lytle Creek are supported by their communities, so they remain reasonably safe from gang violence. But what happens when children go home? Can they stay safe and bring the lessons of character education into their everyday lives?

Fanny's home is full of people. There are more aunts living there than she can count, and her grandparents live with them too. Fanny's father works two jobs. Since he used to change jobs often, her family was always on the move. But now Fanny has been at Lytle Creek for three uninterrupted years, and she feels she has learned a lot from Tzu Chi's character education class. "It is not a normal class. It teaches about behavior and your attitude. And culture. It changed my behavior, especially after seeing those videos about people's conditions. We should help people if they need help and be respectful."

Tammy was born in Mexico. She came to the United States with her family when she was two and has lived in many different places since then. However, she was lucky enough to stay in Lytle Creek Elementary for the past six years and has benefited from Tzu Chi's character education classes since first grade. Tammy says she has learned about kindness, helping others, and saying good words.

Kelly's parents are divorced. She likes to go to school because she can play with her friends. But going to school also makes her nervous because "anything can happen." Graduating from elementary school makes Kelly sad. She worries that she will never see her friends again, including the Tzu Chi volunteers, whom she calls "nice, friendly, and awesome." She likes to hear them read Jing Si Aphorisms aloud from the posters, even in Chinese. "I would like to learn at least three foreign languages: Chinese, Japanese, and French."

Although she is only twelve, Kelly already feels the pressure of life. When asked about her expectations for the future, Kelly replies, "I can't tell, because anything can happen. I don't know anything about the future." Luckily, Kelly has found a way to release her stress: through reading. Her mother, Concepcion, says Kelly did not like to read before, but now she reads for hours on end.

From Concepcion's account of happenings in their neighborhood, it is not difficult to understand

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Kelly's anxiety. "About two years ago, a neighbor's body was found right in front of our house. The body was cut open. It was covered with blood, terrible. The police shut down our street, the siren was sounding, the kids sat on the floor crying. We were all crying, because it was unbelievable.

"Another time, a young guy passed our house, running with a bag of drugs. There were helicopters, police, sirens. . . . The guy jumped from our car to the next house and they caught him right there."

Concepcion reports that in the park that they cross when she takes her kids to school, young men are frequently robbing people, even using weapons. "It's difficult, because as we live here, we live with the violence." Although Concepcion loves exercising, she stopped going to her aerobics class in the park after a man was attacked nearby during her class. "They opened the man's stomach," Concepcion recalls. "It was shocking. We all said, 'Oh, my God!' Where can we find safety? What's going on in our city?"

Since a lot of people are unemployed, Concepcion says many people knock on her door asking for food and work. "They say they will cut our grass for ten dollars, or, 'For thirty dollars I will clean your car.' They just keep on lowering their prices because nobody will hire them."

Will the children of this community face the same dire future if they are not given a moral compass to guide them?



It Takes a Village

Jeanette Perez began teaching at Lytle Creek recently, at the end of 2012. Although it was a bigger school with more students than she was used to, she was not concerned that she did not know anyone there at the time. "I came to work for the kids. I know them. They know me. That's enough."

Ms. Perez believes it is crucial to have the support of parents for the children to truly benefit. "Parents and teachers must work together. It's a partnership. When there are no consequences at home, when you don't get reprimanded, you just don't care."

Even though she has only been at the school for a few short months, Ms. Perez sees the clear impact that Tzu Chi's character education class can make on her students. Right after the tea ceremony class, "the kids were all calm for the rest of the day. They were at ease and at peace with themselves."

"They must read a hundred-page book per week. It's the standard," she explains. "At the beginning of the school year, they weren't reading that much. Punishment is losing recess, lunch detention, etc. Now many have developed the habit of reading." Her most rewarding

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moment, says Perez, is when the class reviews something taught months ago, and a student exclaims, "Oh, I get it now!" "Even if I get through to just one student, it will all be worth it. It makes you want to come back the next day."

Master Cheng Yen has said, "There are no students who cannot be taught; only teachers who do not know how to teach." An African proverb also tells us, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." Education is important. Even more important are caring parents, teachers who know how to teach, and the love of caring people. When teachers, parents, and volunteers work together, children benefit.

(The children's names have been changed to protect their identities.)

Over time, we can build great character, achieve great success, and cultivate great virtue.

~~ Jing Si Aphorism by Dharma Master Cheng Yen ~~

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