

Committed to Giving

Written by Qiu Ru-lian
Friday, 25 January 2008 00:00

Digging holes in the ground, putting in the seeds, and waiting for them to grow—the Zulu volunteers said with smiles that their vegetable gardens were like “monkey farms.” Without any farming skills, the volunteers used love to tend the gardens. Unfortunately, the gardens provided barely enough produce for the thousands of AIDS orphans the volunteers fed. To help more AIDS orphans, four Zulu volunteers visited a farm in Taiwan to learn agricultural skills after attending a training camp at the Tzu Chi headquarters. Hopefully, the new skills they learned will help them increase the productivity from their gardens back in their home country.



Beatrice Ngenzeni Sibisi is busy weeding a kitchen garden with the help of several orphans. They are all soaked with perspiration under the scorching sun. They want to get the seeds planted before the advent of the rainy season. The garden may not produce much, but it is their main source of food.

Over a hundred orphans depend on Beatrice and the garden for their only meal every day. Why does a small community like Beatrice’s have so many orphans?

South Africa has over 40 million people. More than five million of them have AIDS. The number of children orphaned by AIDS is beyond calculation. Seven years ago, when Tzu Chi volunteers went to promote AIDS prevention in the countryside, they discovered this group of children who had no one to care for them. The volunteers began to plant vegetables and provide food for them.

Since then, volunteers have set up 61 food stations in Durban to feed 3,000 orphans. Over 90 percent of them were orphaned when their parents died of AIDS.

At mealtime, Beatrice’s house is filled with children. They range in age from three to thirteen. When they receive their food, they hungrily gobble it down. The older ones help feed the younger ones.

Volunteers also give the orphans winter clothing and help solve their housing and education problems. The volunteers’ continuous charitable efforts have helped resolve misunderstandings that local residents had about AIDS, and have even inspired them to join the ranks of those that care for AIDS patients.

Dissolving hatred with love

Volunteer Brenda Matebula not only provides daily hot meals for over 30 orphans, but she has also adopted five orphans herself.

“Whenever I see these orphans, I think of my own childhood. I wasn’t welcome anywhere. The memory of that makes me want to embrace them with Great Love.”

When Brenda was a girl, one of her relatives contracted AIDS. Brenda’s friends were terrified of the disease and refused to go near her. Her neighbors treated her family with hostility,

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eventually driving them away. “We had to keep moving. I felt worse than an animal.”

Isolated from friends and neighbors, Brenda’s relative eventually passed away. Brenda was filled with anger and resentment. She hated herself for being so powerless. She also lost her trust in her neighbors.

After Brenda got married, she discovered that her sister-in-law had also contracted AIDS. Like all others who suffered the same fate, the sister-in-law was shunned wherever she went. But instead of extending care to her, Brenda chose to ignore her too. She tried to rationalize her actions: “Why should I care? It’s her problem.” In the end, the sister-in-law, unable to stand the disapproving and fearful looks from others, took her own life.

Her sister-in-law’s suicide filled Brenda’s heart with guilt and remorse. After moving to Durban, she became acquainted with Mini Ngcobo, a kind, elderly Tzu Chi commissioner. Brenda told her about the tragedy. Mini encouraged her to talk to Tzu Chi volunteers. “Maybe they can help you feel better,” she suggested. Brenda thought to herself, “Things can’t be worse than they already are. Why don’t I give it a try?”

Brenda said she would never forget the day she went to see the Tzu Chi volunteers. “They didn’t ask me who I was and they didn’t care about my past. They simply gave me hugs when they saw me.” Their kindness and compassion touched Brenda deeply. When she learned that the volunteers were taking care of AIDS patients, she decided to join them.

She took her sister-in-law’s four children into her own house. She looked for suitable families to adopt the orphans in her community and helped find schools for them. Ironically, some of the orphans she looked after came from the families who had once driven her family from their community. Brenda bore no grudges, and instead she helped them just the same.

Brenda said that she used to drink a lot as an escape from her loneliness. She had a bad temper and hurt a lot of people. Even her two sons suffered from her unsteady temper. But now, things are different. Both of them now look up to Brenda as a model. They even help to take care of the orphans.

Brenda felt that if she had been involved in Tzu Chi earlier, maybe her relative who had died of AIDS would have been able to die peacefully. “Even my sister-in-law wouldn’t have committed suicide, because she would have known that there was still love in this world.”

Tender care for the sick

From rejecting and fearing AIDS patients to accepting and caring for them—this is the common experience that binds most of the native African volunteers to one another. Other volunteers started out as Tzu Chi aid recipients only to become care providers themselves. Joyce Nkosi is one of them.

“Only one word can describe the life I used to lead—‘awful,’” she said. A stroke had left her

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husband bedridden, so Joyce had to support her family by cleaning her neighbors' houses and washing their clothes. Day in and day out, she worked hard to eke out a living.



One day she met some Tzu Chi volunteers when she accompanied her husband to a doctor's appointment. They invited her to their monthly gatherings. She went and was warmly welcomed.

The volunteers later visited her and her husband in their home. Their warm attention touched Joyce deeply—she felt “flattered.” Her husband hadn't had any visitors in a long time; the volunteers' visit made him feel very warm.

Joyce took the volunteers' advice and began planting vegetables at her home to help decrease her family's expenses. Her husband adopted a vegetarian diet.

“It was incredible!” Joyce exclaims. “My husband could walk a month later with the help of a crutch!” The couple referred to the volunteers as “doctors” and “nurses,” because they believed it was they who had cured his problem.

Moved by the kindness of the volunteers, Joyce began going with them to visit Tzu Chi aid recipients. She now takes care of seriously ill patients and those suffering from AIDS. She helps change their clothes, kneels down to help them take sponge baths, and gives them massages. She even encourages her neighbors to pitch in to help.

Joyce also looks after children orphaned by AIDS. Her loving example has helped induce a drastic change in her neighbors' hostile attitude toward AIDS patients. They even help Joyce cook meals for AIDS orphans.

Joyce's husband still can't leave home to work, and they are still poor. However, the couple feels that they are much richer than before. Now, their life is filled with love.

“Now I give joyfully without thinking of asking for anything in return,” said Joyce. With a change of mindset, she can now face her hardships with tranquility. “If there is anything I want, it would be that everyone could become a Tzu Chi volunteer, so they can become as happy as me.”

In South Africa, the native volunteers cultivate yams, potatoes, cabbages and carrots. However, their kitchen gardens do not produce much because the volunteers don't know much about farming. The volunteers have to solicit donations to make up for shortages when their gardens don't produce enough food.



In late November 2008, when Brenda and Joyce went to Taiwan to be certified as Tzu Chi commissioners, Gladys and Beatrice went with them. Later, they took a trip to a farm in Yunlin,

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southern Taiwan, to learn agricultural skills. They hoped to increase the production of their gardens so they could feed more orphans.

“Our cabbages are as small and hard as guavas,” said Pan Ming-shui (潘明水), a Tzu Chi volunteer in South Africa. Wang Yu-zhang (王宇章), the owner of the farm and also a Tzu Chi volunteer, taught the women such farming basics as how to cultivate seedlings, how to plant them and use composting to help them grow, when to water the vegetables, at what intervals they should be planted, how to inhibit the growth of weeds, etc.

“On this trip, I learned how crude our farming methods are,” Beatrice remarked. “Our gardens are like ‘monkey farms.’ We simply dig holes, put in the seeds, and wait for them to grow. No wonder we have such poor produce!”

Pan said that according to Zulu tradition, tribal chiefs allocate land to the people. A chief had agreed to provide over two acres of land to Tzu Chi volunteers to grow vegetables. Pan hoped that their improved agricultural techniques will result in more food for more children.

More than ten volunteers work in Beatrice’s kitchen garden. Before she went to Taiwan, they had already turned over the soil to get it ready for the new farming techniques. They hope to turn it into a model garden. They will plant cabbages, tomatoes and lettuce for the first batch of crops. Beatrice said, “It’s my mission to bring back new farming techniques to South Africa, a mission that will bring hope to more AIDS orphans.”

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