

A New School For Hambantota

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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The Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 was the largest and most destructive in recorded history. In an attempt to recover from the awful destruction, the government of Hambantota, Sri Lanka, decided to build a resettlement village for citizens displaced by the disaster. The new community was to be located in Siribopura, a wooded, undeveloped area in the southernmost province of the island. The government appealed to international non-government organizations to underwrite the construction of 3,000 houses for families who had lost their homes to the tidal waves. Tzu Chi responded to the call by building 649 residential units. They comprise the heart of the Tzu Chi Great Love Village (or more simply, "The Village"). They were officially opened in April 2006, and turned over to selected tsunami survivors for occupancy.



Without a pause, Tzu Chi followed with a second phase of construction. Community buildings, including a school and a community center with a medical clinic, were constructed to augment the houses. Though these facilities are located in the Great Love Village, they are open for use by all living in the larger resettlement community. Phase II also included a neighborhood center designed for the exclusive use of the Tzu Chi Village residents.

Tzu Chi National School is designed to serve 920 students, although the initial enrollment was less than full capacity. The buildings on campus contain 23 general classrooms, a library, and nine special-purpose rooms dedicated to computers, music, arts, and science. Additionally, there is a 7,120 square-foot gymnasium; it is big enough to serve as a basketball court and doubles as the assembly hall. The new lighting system in the gym allows it to be used at any time of the day or night.

Generally, inadequate water and power supplies in tropical Hambantota make learning in local schools difficult. The new school, however, is free of these problems. Blessed with its own water tower, the school has restrooms complete with running water and sinks. Ceiling fans, overhead lights and bright floor tiles make classrooms pleasing and comfortable. Such things are not taken for granted in this part of the world. The students know just how lucky they are to have such "luxuries." They fully appreciate that learning comes much easier at this desirable school.

The school's name is affixed on the front wall of the gym in three languages: Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Sinhala is the official national language, spoken by 74 percent of the population. Tamil is another national language, spoken by 18 percent. English is commonly used in government and is spoken competently by about 10 percent of Sri Lankans. The same name and logo in Chinese are located on the front gate of the school as well.

The area just in front of the gym's main entrance offers a wonderful view of the adjoining 400-meter track field below. The woodlands beyond the track stretch into the distance. Sitting on the steps leading to the gym entrance, students can enjoy the activities held on the track field, or simply take pleasure in the gentle breezes brushing against their faces.

National caliber

The second phase of Tzu Chi's involvement in Siribopura was inaugurated on January 5, 2008 14 months after the residential portion of the Great Love Village was completed. Residents of the greater resettlement project, students, and government officials put on their best clothes and arrived at the opening ceremony in motorized trishaws, school buses, and official vehicles. The Tzu Chi Village brimmed with vitality as guests poured in and crowded the compound.

W. G. Chandrasiri, the principal of Beralihela K. V. School, arrived at the gathering with her daughter, a student at the Tzu Chi school. "It feels comfortable and classy," said Chandrasiri, impressed with the new school.



Tzu Chi National School has attracted much attention since its establishment as a middle school, comprised of both junior and senior high sections. It was originally designated a "county-level" school, but it was soon elevated to a "provincial-level" school because of its excellent learning and teaching facilities. After an inspection by the minister of education and the minister of ports and civil aviation, the school was upgraded again, this time to its current national status. The name of the school was changed to Tzu Chi National School to reflect this high status.

Chamal Rajapaksha, the minister of ports and civil aviation, remarked that Tzu Chi National School was one of the two most prestigious NGO-built schools in southern Sri Lanka. He implored the students, faculty, and staff to cherish and support the school, and he encouraged them to make it an outstanding institution. "A school of this caliber is significant for the less developed south," he said. "It is my hope that the best students in the area will willingly forego the opportunity to attend elite schools in Colombo and instead attend Tzu Chi National School. This will help stem the outflow of the south's human capital and help develop the local economy."

After its inauguration, Tzu Chi handed over the school to the government for administration. The school's principal, N. Weerasooriya, knows that the top-notch physical environment is capable of supporting a superior educational institution. He feels a responsibility to guide the school to its full potential, which is nothing short of the best.

Admission priority is given to tsunami survivors who live in the Great Love Village. The school provides scholarships to attract bright students to fill the remaining openings. Along with the standard high school curriculum, students are offered such courses as music, dancing, and sports.

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The school actively recruits qualified teachers. Administrators seek not only the best students for the school, but the most dedicated teachers as well. "We pay special attention to discipline for both the teachers and students," Weerasooriya said. "For example, our program includes teachers' in-service training days, scout courses, and some basic courses on military training. We admire how Tzu Chi runs its schools in Taiwan. We hope to establish exchange programs with them for teachers and administrators."



Inspiring new hope

Two days before the school opened, classroom desks and chairs arrived in four freight containers from across the ocean, donated by Tzu Chi volunteers in Malaysia. Tzu Chi volunteers in Sri Lanka mobilized villagers to unload and assemble the furniture for the classrooms.

S. A. Siriylata, 50, was one of the volunteers helping that day. She rounded up 15 other villagers to help. She said that her home had been wiped out by the tsunami, but that she and her two children were fortunate to have moved into a new home in the Great Love Village. Now the new school for her children was also completed. "My children can attend school here, and so can their children. Tzu Chi has given us a lot. We are really happy!"

Sarifa Zakia, 12, also lived in the Great Love Village. She came with her mother and grandparents to help. Tzu Chi National School was bigger and nicer than her former school. She talked with excitement about the new school: "There are desks, chairs, electric fans, and lights, all of which make me feel hopeful." She played to her heart's content on campus, but took her education very seriously. A rising seventh grader who liked English and math, she had originally wanted to be a teacher, but now she was setting her sights on becoming a medical doctor. "I want to help the poor," she said.

A new community

Siribopura used to be an indigent, backwater area in southern Sri Lanka. Most of its residents lived without the convenience of running water and electricity. But the area has been completely transformed with the resettlement project.

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In addition to the new school, Tzu Chi's second phase of construction work included an assembly hall, a job training center, a neighborhood center in the Village, and a community center with a medical clinic.



Wang Ming-de (王明德) is a Tzu Chi construction commissioner from Taiwan. He has made numerous visits to Siribopura to monitor the construction quality of the Tzu Chi Great Love Village. He said, "Most people here rely on fishing for a living, but many of them are finding it increasingly difficult to support their families in this traditional occupation. There is a real need for a job training center to help those who are contemplating or are in need of a career change."

The job training center, managed by the government, has three classrooms. One type of training, for high school graduates, lasts one year. Others may enroll in programs lasting six months. The cost to participate in a training session is 250 rupees (US\$2.30). Courses in culinary arts, tailoring, welding, and automobile repairs are being planned.

The medical clinic is located within the community center. It has two treatment rooms, a waiting lounge, a patient room, and an observation room. It even has a health education classroom. The neighborhood center, which covers 8,890 square feet, features two classrooms, an office, a great hall, and three shops. The assembly hall can hold up to 600 people. The village is located on a Hambantota city bus route, thus allowing easy transportation into and out of the community. Mobile library trucks, provided by the government, crisscross the vast 3,000-home village to spread intellectual nourishment.

As the village grows, residents have access to more and more services and programs. It is exciting to see so many practical plans being implemented for residents. The resettlement village in Siribopura is looking more and more like a full-functioning, vibrant community.

For green thumbs of all shades

Li Wen-jie (李文杰) is a Tzu Chi volunteer from Malaysia. The site for the Siribopura resettlement village was nothing but undeveloped woodland when he came to Hambantota with the first wave of aid groups after the tsunami. He witnessed a bulldozer scraping up the first scoop of earth as construction for the new village began.

When he returned three years after the tsunami, he saw the grand opening of Tzu Chi's second phase facilities. The Tzu Chi Great Love Village, completed and occupied more than a year earlier, looked quite different. The 649 resident families have lovingly decorated their sizeable yards with plants; the community is now lush with shrubs, flowers, fruit trees, and hedges.

Zheng Bang-wan (郑邦万), from Taiwan, started a nursery in the Village when the first phase of construction began. Now the nursery's many seedlings have been transplanted, and they flourish throughout the Village, adding even more vitality to the surroundings. "When we were here during the construction, we bought jackfruit to eat. Of course, I toyed with their seeds at

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the nursery. And now look! We're now ended up with more than a thousand seedlings!" Zheng spoke like a proud father.



In harmony with nature

Guo Shu-sheng (郭淑生) also witnessed Siribopura's transformation from woodland to a 3,000-family community. He was the architect for the 649-unit residential portion of the Village as well as the second phase facilities. "In the beginning, the Village was just an idea on paper. But the love and hard work of so many people in Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan moved this thought from the drawing board to a reality in Sri Lanka! It is also comforting to see that the residents are using their homes in ways that are very close to what I envisioned. The residents have put each part of the community to very creative and appropriate use. I am very touched by their ingenuity and mindfulness."

Guo designed ditches to run down the gentle slopes in the Great Love Village to channel run-off water to a man-made lake below the community. He also designed the lake. "The ditches drain water away before the rain can erode the soil. The lake collects water and acts as a buffer that regulates and staves off flooding." The whole system works exactly as he envisioned.

During the construction of the Great Love Village, the project was often hamstrung by a lack of water. Now the lake supplies water to the Village. Many trucks come to fill their water tanks, too. Furthermore, the lake has attracted wildlife back to the area. Peacocks and herons come to the lake to rest or feed as water buffaloes cool themselves in the water on hot summer afternoons. All this is happening with the newly built resettlement homes in the background's harmonious and soothing sight to behold.

By Qiu Shu-juan

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