

## Las Vegas Volunteer Finds Tzu Chi Logo in Deserts of Iran

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
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David Ding has been a Tzu Chi volunteer in the Las Vegas branch for nine years. In February this year, he made a special journey – to the city of Bam, in the southeast desert of Iran – and saw the five schools built there by the foundation after a devastating earthquake in December 2003. It gave him a new understanding of the real blessings of life.

Iran is a country with an ancient culture and civilization; it has more than 70 million people, 90 per cent of them Muslims. It has a long history of art, music, architecture, poetry and philosophy, because of its location in a sensitive region of the Middle East, the region makes travelers nervous and fearful. But this did not deter David Ding, a dentist who lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA. In February, he made a visit to Iran, going through Taiwan; it was his first to that country. He ignored the advice of his wife who urged him not to go, saying that it was too dangerous. But he said: “I want to see things with my own eyes.” Having made this decision, David made his preparations and set out.

One day during his trip, he was dozing in the tourist bus and heard the guide say: “ahead of us is a place that is not on the itinerary but perhaps you would like to visit. It is a place where a charity from Taiwan built a school. Would anyone like to see it?” When he heard this, David’s curiosity was aroused and he said: “of course I would like to see it.” Reminded by the guide, he immediately thought back to a devastating earthquake, measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale, that struck the southeastern city of Bam in the early hours on December 26, 2003. It killed more than 26,000 people and injured 30,000. The death toll was so high because most of the buildings were made of mud bricks and did not resist the quake; at that moment, most people were indoors and asleep when it struck. More than 70 per cent of the structures in the city collapsed.

The Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan mobilized volunteers in countries near Iran to go to Bam and provide emergency assistance. In the most difficult circumstances, they also built five schools, of which four were for girls; this enabled the young women of Iran, dressed in their black veils, to receive a modern education. David stood in front of one of these schools and heard the guide’s explanation; he was very keen to see it with his own eyes.



### Tzu Chi in the Midst of the Desert

For David, it was a very long journey. He flew from the western side to the eastern side of the world and then flew again to the desert areas of Iran. In the middle of the yellow sand, he saw the familiar of Tzu Chi’s green ship logo – how unpredictable is destiny.

He said: “all over the world there are charity groups and so many people doing good. But no

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charity could have done what Tzu Chi has done. I saw the schools it built in Bam, with funds raised from its own members. I saw the sun set over the green ship that is our logo. I was very moved.” What he saw the school for myself, he was filled with happiness. It made him understand the true meaning of ‘doing good deeds’. At the same time, he felt a cleansing of his spirit, that it is a greater blessing to give than to receive.

When he was in Bam, David walked around the Tzu Chi school and saw for himself the Great Love that has no boundaries. He realized that, in building the schools in Iran, the foundation had not only contributed money and hard work but also accepted the students ‘without conditions’. It did not say that they must believe in Buddhism and did not proselytize in the school; it gave the building directly to the educational authorities in Iran to run. Its aim was to allow children to concentrate on their education. David believes that Tzu Chi is selfless and pure love, to create a circle of goodness. In the end, the children of the school will understand how to help other people.

He took many photographs with his camera to make a moving record. Each image showed the young Iranians with a broad smile; they opened his heart. David said: “Tzu Chi not only feeds those who are hungry. It also enables the young people of Iran, especially the young women, have an opportunity to receive an education. When this seed has grown into a large tree, they can look after even more people.”



### **A Young Student became a Fine Doctor**

When David was 12, he moved to Los Angeles and saw the ‘blue sky and the white clouds’ (the uniform worn by Tzu Chi volunteers); but he did not know what they did. He was a Christian and did not have a deep understanding of this Buddhist organisation. After he graduated from university, he heard that the foundation had done a good job of organising dental services at its medical clinic. This was his first impression of it.

Later, he moved to Las Vegas. There he met the volunteers at an outdoor event when they were recruiting members; he told them proudly – “if you need help, I will be happy to take part.” In 2003, he joined the volunteer medical team in Las Vegas and became the deputy organizer, a position he has held until today.

Gao Cui-ling is a nurse who has been deeply influenced by David. She is very busy in her work and has two young children to care for at home. But she always finds the time to take care of people. Traffic accidents are frequent in this city of gambling; victims of the accidents can stay in the hospital for months. Often, after working for more than ten hours, she will go to visit the sick people whom the foundation is looking after; exhausted, she will return home late in the night.

She is full of love and compassion. On one occasion, she and David together went to visit a

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Sichuan woman who had cancer in the last stage. They accompanied her on her final journey. David saw how Gao fulfilled her mission of helping ordinary people and understood the journey which Tzu Chi people make. He vowed that he himself would follow the road of Master Cheng Yen.

Not everyone is blessed

Over the past 10 years, David has supported the Tzu Chi International Medical Association in giving classes; he has also provided financial and material support to the foundation's charity programs. For example, he has given toothpaste and toothbrushes to children waiting in line in front of a reception center for victims of family violence. Each week, he takes his children to attend class at the Tzu Chi Academy, where they learn the principle of filial piety, good manners and Mandarin.

Before he went to Iran, he assumed that good fortune was something you could take for granted. But this visit to Iran gave him a deep awakening. He realised that blessed life was not as it should be by rights – education is not the right of every child. In fact, children in the United States are too fortunate and do cherish what they have. So, after he returned, he said: "is this actually a misfortune to grow up in a rich and prosperous society?"

Las Vegas is one of the world's biggest gambling centers, with millions of dollars gambled away on the card tables every day. The city never sleeps but is a maze of glittering lights and sparking neon.



### Illusions of the Casino

What David sees makes him sad in his heart. "Very many people are confused," he said. "They give birth to and raise their children and work hard to earn money and raise their family. After that, they wait for death. They do not realize there are many meaningful things that they can do. They should not waste their life! To live in the United States is a blessing and no-one can deprive you of this materialist civilization. Although many charities do good works in the country, few are those who see they need spiritual reform."

The visit to Iran was not simply a voyage for David; his greatest reward from the trip was a sense of gratitude for life. In that Islamic country, a school built by Tzu Chi could bring blessings that he had before taken for granted. "

### Unconditional love: Awakening leads to Blessings

By seeing the work of Great Love done by Tzu Chi, David saw and understood what Master Cheng Yen means when she says: "doing good means pure and unconditional giving and expecting no reward. So love in its purest form can continue and spread for ever!"

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