

Working Together to Build New Homes

Written by Tu Xin-yi

Tuesday, 05 January 2010 11:06



October is the harvest season for ginger in Namasia, a township in the mountains of Kaohsiung County, southern Taiwan. Starting in October, Liu Ming-ze usually spends two to three months visiting farmers to assess the quality of their ginger. He then purchases stock and sells it to wholesalers.

However, a few days ago he drove along the mountain roads for four hours and returned empty-handed. "I visited the farmers and none had ginger that met market standards."

This was the result of [Typhoon Morakot](#), which devastated Namasia in early August, forcing villagers to evacuate their homes and farmers to leave their fields. Torrential rains saturated the ground and caused horrific mudflows in the mountains. Afterwards, the ginger fields began to fill with weeds, which sucked up the soil's nutrients and degraded the quality of the ginger.

Having lost his source of income, Liu did not wallow in despair. "Fortunately, Tzu Chi offered us jobs with the permanent housing project, so I was able to sustain a living."

Typhoon Morakot ravaged Jiayi, Kaohsiung, Pingdong, and the mountain areas of Taidong. Relocation was being considered for residents of 33 areas currently judged as being "unsafe." For many of the flood survivors, leaving their mountain homes was a painful, albeit necessary, decision.

Using land provided by the government, Tzu Chi plans to build 800 to 1,000 housing units at Yuemei Farm in Shanlin Village, Kaohsiung, which will house residents from Jiaxian, Liugui, Namasia, and Taoyuan townships. Preparation for construction on this lush piece of land began at the end of September, with many construction jobs given to typhoon survivors as part of the Tzu Chi work relief program.

Two months after Typhoon Morakot, the flood survivors sweat and toil on the site of the permanent housing project, a program which has given them a chance to work again after the typhoon wrenched away their livelihood. Working as a group to build their own homes has boosted morale and imbued these survivors with hope.



Healing wounds with work

For Lin Qiu-mei, a survivor from Namasia, the work relief program provides her with a salary and a starting point to rebuild her home.

When disaster struck, her house was carried away by a mudflow, and so was her family, including her husband, brother, sister-in-law, and other relatives. She lost a total of eight family members in the typhoon.

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In the past two months, she has become absent-minded and easily forgets things people have just told her. She said, "I'm becoming very forgetful. This may be a symptom of what they call post-traumatic syndrome."

In Namasia, education only reaches junior high school. Several years ago, Lin accompanied her son to the lowlands, where he went to attend high school. "My son and I were planning to go back to our home in the mountains for Father's Day, but we didn't get to go because the roads had been washed out."

She remembers how frightened she was to see her home destroyed by the mudflow. When she went back after the disaster and saw that what she called home had been reduced to a roof, she was shocked. "If we had gone back then, we wouldn't be alive now."

Standing in front of what remained of her home, overwhelmed by the bleak reality before her, Lin was filled with pangs of sadness. She wanted to cry out loud, but no tears would come.

When her village was designated an unsafe area, she quickly decided to move into one of the permanent houses that Tzu Chi is building for people affected by the typhoon. She said that even if her home were still there, she would not dare to live in such a volatile area. "The most beautiful memories are there, and so are the saddest."



To cope with the pain of losing her family, Lin turned to hard manual work, which allowed her to gradually let go of her negative emotions. "I'd been looking forward to the chance to work ever since learning from Tzu Chi volunteers that there would be jobs in the work relief program."

While working, Lin pictures in her mind the image of her future home. She plans to watch her new house being built from the ground up. "After I settle into the new home, I'll tell my grandchildren how this place was once a vast land with trees and how it eventually turned into an area with beautiful homes. The story will be passed down from generation to generation, and my grandchildren will tell their children that Great-grandmother was once affected by a strong typhoon, and that Tzu Chi built this house and helped us gradually rebuild our homes and our lives."

Lin broke into laughter. "I seem to be thinking too much! But just thinking about it gives me a sense of accomplishing something." This feeling of accomplishment energizes her. "I will come every day and build our homes along with all the other survivors."

Respect for nature

In early October, Tzu Chi volunteers organized a team to care for the construction workers. "On the first day, we went to the construction site and saw that many trees had been bulldozed to clear the land," said volunteer Lu Jin-yong. "It was truly heartrending."

The permanent housing site boasts an area of approximately 39 hectares (about 96 acres). Lu

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explained that the trees on the site are about 6 to 7 years old. He believes that every tree is a life, and he could not bear to see them being destroyed.



The Tzu Chi work relief program began on October 12, and with respect for all living beings and the environment in mind, one of the first tasks was to save the trees. “The construction will progress very quickly,” Lu commented. “We must seize every available moment and invest all efforts to save these trees.”

Volunteer Guo Sheng-zhang, who had gotten experience in transplanting trees elsewhere, remarked, “Actually, now is the worst time to transplant trees, but the construction cannot wait because we hope the residents can have their own homes soon.” He noted that autumn is the season when trees recuperate, and that transplanting them at this time might kill them. To enhance the trees’ survival rate, he gave the other volunteers tips on how best to handle the job. The local forests contained about eight precious tree species, including mahogany and Formosan ash. Guo taught the volunteers how to trim and cut the branches according to the characteristics of the trees. For example, mahogany has only one main trunk, so workers only needed to cut the leaves; Formosan ash, on the other hand, has more branches, so two of the best branches had to be saved and the rest could be removed.

The volunteers and the participants of the work relief program listened attentively to the instructions. One resident, Li Qing-ming, exclaimed, “That’s just how we grow ginger in the mountains. We have to save the best to grow new ginger plants.” There was much to learn in this deceptively simple job, but local residents picked it up very quickly. “This is like what we do up in the mountains.”

Lin Qiu-mei works fast, cutting unneeded branches and stems while trimming intertwined tree roots. She applies resin to the surfaces of the cuts to prevent tree moisture from evaporating; then she wraps the roots with black netting and thus completes the first step of the transplantation process.



After this step, the trees, large and small, are craned onto trucks and taken to Tzu Chi offices elsewhere. One volunteer said, “Transplanting requires land. Fortunately Tzu Chi has branch offices and recycling stations in Kaohsiung and Pingdong with plenty of land.”

Working under the fierce sun, the residents do not complain. Instead, they focus on their assigned tasks. They reason: “These trees have been here for seven years. We have come here to borrow space from them. Of course we should safely transport them somewhere else.”

Cheerful workers

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To ensure the project's rapid progress, work relief program member Liu Ming-ze worked with haste. As a result, he accidentally grazed his arm with a saw, and blood began pouring out. When volunteers anxiously rushed to his aid, he comforted them by saying, "Today is my first day at work. Seeing red is a sign of good fortune!"

His humor relaxed the volunteers, but they still contacted medical personnel and asked them to tend to the wound. Dr. Ye Tian-haoa member of the [Tzu Chi International Medical Association](#) (TIMA), rushed to the scene carrying a medical kit. Although the bleeding soon stopped, Dr. Ye still gave him a tetanus injection. "The wound is very small, but we must be careful since he was cut with a dirty blade."

Members of TIMA serve at the construction site every day, as do volunteers who care for the construction workers. Two hours after the start of work at seven in the morning, volunteers bring cold beverages and fresh sandwiches.

"We have snacks in the mornings and afternoons." Lin Qiu-mei smiled. "Where else can you find such good work conditions?" Tzu Chi volunteers treat them tenderly, the way parents care for their children. "They encourage us to rest under trees when it's hot, and they remind us to stay safe during work."

At noon, when they return to the office for lunch, volunteers have prepared cool wet towels and water for them. The residents place the cool towels on their faces and say, "This is so nice! We're going to come back tomorrow for these towels!"

"During the construction of [Taipei Tzu Chi Hospital](#), we saw how the local volunteers provided cool towels, so we learned from them." Volunteer Lu Jin-yong said that by simply dipping wet towels in a bucket of ice and twisting them till they are just damp, they are able to reinvigorate tired workers.



Besides caring for the workers, volunteers also form recycling teams and collect trash at the worksite twice a day. "It's very heart-warming. Working in such a comfortable environment every day really lifts our spirits." Construction worker Xiang Peng-yin said that after a few days on site, the workers even changed their habits. "We won't be lazy and litter again."

The construction of the Jing Si Hall in Kaohsiung began seven years ago. During its four years of construction, volunteers cared for the workers every day. Now that construction has begun at the permanent housing project, they are able to quickly assign duties and mobilize volunteers based on past experience. Lu Jin-yong, who had participated in the construction of the Jing Si Hall, commented that in the coming year or two, Tzu Chi volunteers will work with typhoon survivors every day to rebuild their beautiful homes. "This is the duty of Tzu Chi volunteers—to be at the frontline and stay till the end."

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It is already autumn, but the fierce sun still brings oppressive heat to Kaohsiung. After lunch, residents take off their perspiration-soaked clothes, dry them in the sun, and rest under trees. The sound of snoring soon fills the air.

Lin Qiu-mei giggles. "I haven't actively participated in anything in a long time. I was so excited last night about coming to work today that I couldn't sleep. I was like a schoolgirl looking forward to going on a picnic." Her pay of 800 NT dollars (US\$23) a day is not extravagant, but it is enough to set her mind at ease.

After the other aboriginal workers fell asleep, Zhang Fan-sheng, Lin Jian-zhi and Deng Yi-luan began chatting under the trees. Glancing at the site they will eventually call home, they said that they do not regret moving down from the mountains. "After all, we can no longer live in the mountains. And living conditions in the mountains are not as good as those in the lowlands. This disaster is an opportunity for us to seek a better life."

Zhang felt sad about giving up the home he grew up in, but he was not afraid to let go. "In the future, a school, a sports arena, and a church will be built here. It's as if we were transporting our mountain village down to the lowlands."

For the disaster survivors, their new home brings hope for a new beginning and a new life. It is, after all, the site on which they will pave their futures.

Translated by Siri Su and Elad Bruhl

Photos by Lin Yan-huang

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