Don't just feel bad, reach out to needy

By Shashank Nigam
Columnist

How likely, do you think, are the following things to happen in Singapore?
◆ A 5-year-old child getting a new toy only after she gives away an older one.
◆ An Austrian preschooler learning Mandarin at a kindergarten.
◆ The mother of a young child, working up to 16 hours a day to help feed the poor.

Many of us would say they are highly unlikely.
But here is the surprise: All of the above are happening in the same family.

When 5-year-old Mercedes Laimer wanted a new toy last year, her mother took her to the Toy Drive organised by a Singapore non-governmental organisation (NGO), Food From The Heart (FFTH).

Mercedes had to trade in her old toys for new ones there.
The Toy Drive worked with 17 donor schools and distributed a total of 10,000 toys to 600 needy families in Singapore.

The result was FFTH, which was set up in February 2003 with 130 volunteers. They tied up with leading bakeries to collect leftovers and distribute them to the needy.

Now, the programme collects an average of 20,000kg of bread a month. More than 2,000 volunteers have registered with the charity.
Those who have benefited include residents of 170 welfare homes and needy families that have a household income of less than $200 per month.

Remarkable, isn’t it?
The real courage, Mrs Laimer has shown, is only magnified when you find out that she began spearheading the charity’s operations when Mercedes was only a few months old, at a time when she needed the most care.

Now, the girl is 5 and has learnt to share her toys.
She is learning Mandarin too, at a local kindergarten, as her parents want her to be well-integrated in society here.

Mrs Laimer is not Singaporean.

But not many Singaporeans I know would jump at the chance to make a difference to someone after reading a news story.

Many of us might feel bad. But what’s missing, perhaps, is the guts to initiate something that will change lives.

INSPIRED
In a rush of inspiration, I decided I wanted to do something for the community after hearing the remarkable story of FFTH from Mrs Laimer herself.

Then I came across PlanetRead’s Website.
PlanetRead is an NGO that aims to teach everyone to read and have access to interesting and affordable reading opportunities in his or her native or other language.
They use a method called Same Language Subtitling, which is a karaoke approach to literacy. Lyrics are added to popular music videos, film songs or programmes on TV. The words are highlighted as they are sung, so viewers learn to read as they watch.

In June, I will be flying to Mumbai – my first visit – to work for a month there and help promote literacy programmes in the rural areas.
Despite all the “warnings” from friends about the hot weather, mosquitoes and other risks, I feel a strong urge to make some meaningful use of my time before I start work.

After all, a billion people survive in that environment, so why can’t I?
Similarly, if an Austrian can pour her heart out for Singaporeans, why not you and I?

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