失聪学生到印度乡下当义工

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埃丽卡（Erika Levi，19岁）虽然生活在一个无声的世界，但这并没有阻止她与新加坡管理大学的学生，一同到印度锡金（Sikkim）乡下当义工，运用自己的美术与设计才华，让当地居民受益。

12名新大学生与5名患有听觉障碍或失聪的年轻人在去年12月展开为期23天的行程，与当地生态保护组织“千城إق嘉生态保护委员会”（Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee）合作，帮助锡金西部的约森（Yksar）村设计手册，推广当地的环保旅游（ecotourism）。

队员出发前先学手语

埃丽卡与一同到锡金的新大队友曾淑彬（21岁）、许紫君（24岁）与诗敏（20岁）一起接受记者访问。他们拜托手语的诗敏向她讲特别好，她为了记者能翻译成手语，确保记者能与埃丽卡沟通。

埃丽卡是拉萨尔艺术学院视觉传播系学生，是第一次到国外参与社区服务。这次行程的任务包括设计宣传单与手册，介绍当地的大自然旅游景点、住宿计划等，正好让她发挥所长。

大伙儿的行程还包括远足爬山。据埃丽卡说是游泳健将，队友都说，他的体力非常好，无须他们给予特别照顾。

随行的新大学生活动部经理陈秀玲说，校方每年都会主办社区服务活动，不过这是新大生第一次与患有听觉障碍及失聪的年轻人合作。他们在出发前都上了8堂手语课程，学习与患有听觉障碍的新朋友沟通，而且一直到乌敏岛进行两天的训练，建立团队精神。

埃丽卡说，她一向有跟听觉正常的朋友接触，因此与新大学生在沟通与合作方面并没有问题。而且，队友都对手语很感兴趣，非常积极学习。诗敏还会给她吃饭、逛街，两人也因此成为了好朋友。

许紫君则说：“我们的手语虽然不是掌握得很好，不过学会了通过脸部表情与肢体语言传达信息，有时也靠纸和笔。”

向失聪妇女学习开朗

在锡金的日子，他们都被村民的热情招待感动，埃丽卡的接触特别深。

她说：“他们把我们当一般人看待，不像在新加坡，有时还是有人会以异样的眼光看我。他们虽然不懂得手语，不过还是会尝试比手画脚，我与他们沟通。”

与村子里一名失聪的妇女见面，让埃丽卡留下深刻印象。

她说：“她没有受到教育，沟通感到失落，不过她很开心、开朗、平和。”

这次的社区服务，也让埃丽卡更有信心与陌生人接触。

她说：“失聪者要与陌生人说话，其实需要很大勇气。”

Disabled students head for India to be volunteers

19-year-old Erika Levi lives in a world with no sound. This, however, does not prevent her from joining a group of SMU undergraduates to head down to Sikkim in India to do voluntary work. She used her art and design skills to benefit residents in Sikkim.

12 SMU students and five hearing impaired youths set off for a 23-day expedition to Sikkim last December. They partnered with Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee, a local conservation group to reach out to a village in the west of Sikkim called Yuksam to help them design a booklet to promote ecotourism in the region.

Team members learn sign language before setting off

Erika and three members of the SMU team – Mr Chan Wen Bin (21 years old), Ms Koh Su Jun (24 years old) and Ms Jasmine Neubronner Shi Min (20 years old) – were interviewed by Lianhe Zaobao. Erika is especially close to Jasmine who picked up sign language skills from her. Jasmine helped translate the reporter's questions into sign language so that the reporter can communicate with Erika.

Erika is a visual communications student at LaSalle and this is the first time she is venturing overseas for community service. The expedition involves designing and developing a publicity brochure and booklet to market the region’s nature scenery, tourist attractions and accommodation. It allows her the chance to hone her design skills.

The team members will also be climbing some mountains during the trip. Erika is an avid swimmer and she is physically very fit. Therefore, there is no need to worry about her physical ability.

Ms Lynn Tan (manager for student life at SMU who has since left the university) accompanied the team to Sikkim. She said that SMU organises many community service outreach every year but this is the first time SMU is working closely with hearing impaired students. Before setting off, the students attended eight sessions of sign language classes to learn how to communicate with this group of new friends. They also went to Pulau Ubin to undergo two days of training and build team spirit.

Erika said that she has always been interacting with hearing people and therefore has no difficulty communicating and working with the group of SMU students. The SMU team members are also very enthusiastic about picking up sign language and have been working hard in learning it. Jasmine would also often ask Erika out for meals and shopping, becoming good friends in the process.

Su Jun said: "Though my sign language is not up to scratch but I can still rely on facial expression and body language to put both sides' points across."
While in Sikkim, they are often touched by the warmth and hospitality of the villagers. The impact was deepest for Erika.

She said: “They treated me just like a normal person. Unlike in Singapore where occasionally, people will give us different looks. Though they do not know sign language, yet they will still try their best to use gesticulation to communicate with me.”

She met an intellectually disabled woman in the village who left a deep impression on her.

She said: “She has not been educated and often use drawings to talk to me. She’s always smiling. Sometimes I will be sad when I cannot get my points across but this lady always remain happy.”

This expedition has given Erika much more confidence to communicate with strangers.

She said: “Disabled people need a lot of courage to talk to strangers.”

Sometimes, I also rely on a pen and paper.”