“学校文化”体现
新大学生爱到海外做义工

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SMU

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Over the past few years, Singapore Management University (SMU) student Jerry Lewis Ong had actively participated in community service in Singapore and overseas, and volunteers regularly at a local hospital. Although SMU requires all its students to complete 80 hours of community service as a graduation requirement, Jerry had not submitted his volunteer hours to the school – certainly a display of unconditional contribution.

Jerry, 25, who is a political science student, was in Cambodia for the first time three years ago to help the villages build wells. “That was the first time I came in close contact with the poor... It was the first time I saw children without clothes on, and they drank from a muddy puddle. After I returned, I was determined to do something.”

Thereafter, he saved up his pocket money to finance more community service trips to China and India.

Two years ago, following a friend’s introduction, he started to volunteer at the Institute of Mental Health’s children’s ward. Together with a group of volunteers, he organised activities for the children such as basketball, art sessions, festive celebrations etc. In order to be better equipped to help the patients whom he interacts with, he even took up a counselling module at SMU.

Jerry’s father is an odd-job worker and his mother is a part-time cook, he is the eldest at home, with three younger brothers. The family of six lives in a three-room HDB flat.

Given his background, Jerry had originally planned to focus on getting a good job after graduation, thus he applied to SMU’s School of Information Systems. However, his trip to Cambodia changed his perspectives. To better understand social issues and enhance his knowledge in the area, he appealed to transfer to SMU’s School of Social Sciences. That way, he could be more effective when helping those whom he meets during his volunteer work. He hopes to work with humanitarian organisations after graduation.

Jerry hopes to work in the United Nations upon graduation. He had previously worked (without salary or allowance) with two UN agencies during past school holidays – UNESCO Bangkok and UNHCR Malaysia.

More than half of SMU’s students continue to participate in community service

Since the inception of the University in 2000, all SMU students have to fulfil 80 hours of community service. More than half of the students continue to volunteer after meeting the 80-hour requirement, serving 120 to 500 hours or more per individual.

According to SMU’s records, over 4,000 students participated in some form of community service within the year, of which over 60% were involved in some form of community services work in Singapore.

In May last year, SMU sent its first community service group to Kashgar, Xinjiang (China). The role of the 17-student group was to set up a ‘Uyghur Cultural Centre’ with a fund of S$20,000, to help the Uyghur community preserve its eroding culture.

With help from a Singaporean hotelier in Kashgar, the group got the support of a local farm owner, who provided the venue. They renovated the mud-brick house on the farm and went around Kashgar to source for traditional artifacts and items reflecting the Uyghur heritage, to be placed in the cultural centre. The centre, when completed, showcased Uyghur traditional costumes, food, musical instruments and living spaces.

When interviewed, team leader, Matilda Lim Yunn, 22, said the original inhabitants of Kashgar comprised mainly of Uyghurs. In recent years, more Han Chinese have migrated there, resulting in a decrease in Uyghur population to less than half of the total population in Kashgar. Many traditions have been lost and old buildings have given way to modernisation. The Uyghur culture is eroding away, and may eventually be lost.

“Therefore, there was a need to preserve some parts of their culture, so that future generations of Uyghurs can learn about their past,” Matilda said.

Co-leader Melissa Chan Shi Rong, 20, shared that one of the challenges that the team faced was that a lot of the traditional Uyghur heritage items have been lost and the team had to search around the whole city in search for them. For example, they saw a picture of a traditional wedding costume in a book, however, such costumes could no longer be found, and they had to get a tailor to custom-make one piece just for the centre.

After returning to Singapore, the students received a piece of good news. The Uyghur Cultural Centre they set up had helped the local farm owner obtain a license to run a vocational school which will allow young people in the local community to receive hospitality training.

SMU plans to send another team to Kashgar this year to refurbish the centre’s interior and exterior, the team will also set up a virtual tour of the centre, in a bid to promote Kashgar’s tourism.

Photo caption: The Uyghur Culture Centre set up by SMU students showcases traditional Uyghur costumes, food, musical instruments and living spaces.