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Work Camp in Bojonegoro, Surabaya

Adeline Lim recalls the days she spent in Surabaya last June, being part of a team of twelve young women who wanted to make a contribution to society.

07/21/2009

From June 13 – 21, a small group of young women volunteered for a project aimed at elevating the condition of the girls at St Anne's Orphanage. There were 12 pairs of

hands ready to serve: 6 from Singapore, 4 from Malaysia and 2 Surabayans living in Singapore. Adeline, a medical student from Kuala Lumpur, recalls her impressions.

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Surabaya workcamp. These words were enough to trigger excitement among those of us who were planning to set foot in Indonesia, more so in Bojonegoro, a little town 90km west of Surabaya.

The ground work for the project was tremendous and fund raising was our greatest concern. Thanks to generous donors and relatives who contributed selflessly, a good sum was raised in the end. We were also armed with an armamentarium of goods in kind: clothes, toys, stationery, crockery, Tupperware, even soap; and most interestingly, bags of peanuts with compliments

from Malaysia Airlines after the air steward learnt why we were heading for Indonesia.

With a master plan in hand, the team gathered in Surabaya, arriving on different flights. Accompanied by an additional 4 local friends, we began our journey to St Anne's Orphanage in the town of Bojonegoro. For the next 3 hours, our eyes feasted on beautiful vast landscapes of paddy fields, villages and lakes. Dusk came swiftly and by 6 pm, we were shrouded in darkness. Our arrival at the orphanage was greeted with great warmth. It was evident that the children did not often have visitors, less so from abroad.

St Anne's Orphanage is a haven for 49 girls aged between 6 and 19 years, who come from different backgrounds and places, some as far as Papua. Some are orphans, while others have parents who are

divorced or single. In any case, one main reality holds true for each one: their families are too poor to provide for them. At the orphanage, they find shelter, food and the opportunity to go to school, to try to secure a better future.

Over the next few days, we delivered the program we had worked on. We taught English and various life skills modules such as study tips, mind mapping techniques, interview skills and personal finance management. There were also workshops on social graces and character improvement. These were part of the project's objectives, which was to impart knowledge that could serve them in the future.

Yet, it was not all work and no play. We had loads of fun and laughter during the arts and crafts session, making cards, photo frames, mirror prints and friendship bands, which

kept the girls up all night. The sing-along sessions were a blast with action songs in both English and Bahasa Indonesia, intertwined with games. The games and songs certainly bonded us in a way that talking alone would never have.

Then, there was the telematch. It was a grand way to bring out leadership qualities and teamwork in the girls. Each team had to perform their group cheer. There was tug-of-war among other games, and more traditional ones like 'galah panjang'. The petite frames and gentle demeanours of the girls really belied their dynamism and energy!

With an artistic twist from Chai Chin and Joanna, our plan to white-wash part of the study hall with the help of the children ended up with the creation of a mural. Nature was clearly the theme with the many

trees and flowers and a large bird in their painting. The kids loved it!

In the midst of all the action, we consciously tried to impress upon the girls the importance of education. Putting the donor's money to good use, we bought books of different genre to fill up a little library of brightly-coloured shelves, complete with a mat at a corner of the study hall as an enticement to read. We hope that they would develop a deeper love for knowledge as well as good reading habits.

A highlight of our stay was a trip to the Wisata Bahari Lamongan theme park, some 3 hours drive from Bojonegoro. It was a day of recreation for us, but for the children, it was one of their rare outings. We enjoyed the rides, swam, canoed and had a great day together. The ride home was a karaoke session

– the girls were a naturally gifted choir.

Perhaps the most memorable event was the Graduation Night of 8 senior high school girls who had scored well at their final exams. Now aged 19, they will have to leave and move on with their lives: some have places in nursing and teaching colleges while others have gotten jobs elsewhere. It was a time of great joy for everyone. Donors from all over came to congratulate these girls as well as to pledge their support for the orphanage, and the children put up a variety show. It was a night to remember, a night of mixed feelings for the girls, of joy and pride for their achievements, and of sorrow at having to leave the place they had known as home.

Having completed nearly all we had set out to do, only one thing remained. On the final night, we had

a little award giving ceremony, which also included a surprise scholarship fund of 6 million Rupiahs. A scholarship of 1.5 million will be awarded to the best student from each graduating batch as tuition fees. It was a bursary aimed at motivating the children to excel in their studies, and they were ecstatic!

When the time came, it was hard to leave. We said our farewells and prayed that the children would continue to grow in knowledge, strength and stature and be a blessing for those around them. Their gentleness and cheerfulness had indeed impressed upon us a phrase they repeated often: “persahabatan sejati tidak terbatas oleh tempat dan waktu”; true friendship and love transcends all barriers.

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