

Finding Ways to Help Others

Sean

Second-year high school student,
17, Kanagawa



Volunteering for Children

In my second year of junior high school, which is part of a Christian-affiliated secondary school,* I joined the school's volunteer activities committee. I had always thought volunteering was a good thing and I was interested in helping people. Also, a friend of mine had already decided to join the committee.

Once a month on a Sunday, committee members go to a children's welfare facility to play with children who are living away from their parents for various reasons. Our biggest event is the Christmas party in December, when we invite the kids to our school. We ask all the students to take part in this event. We spend the whole day with the kids, playing with them in the gym and out on the athletics field, listening to the brass band play music, and playing games. This event has been held at our school for over 30 years.

The children each pair up with a student, and sometimes they enjoy it so much that when the day is over they say, "I don't want to go home!" Not only is it great to see them having so much fun, we ourselves experience something very fresh when we are playing with the children.

Learning about Hunger

During the summer last year (2007), at the encouragement of our committee advisor, I took part in what was called the "High School Student's Public Activity Leadership Workshop." It was held for three days in August and attracted about 30 high school students from the prefecture interested in welfare and international public-benefit activities. The purpose was to nurture next-generation leaders.

Specialists were invited to talk about the civil society, non-profit international activities, the current situation for people

with disabilities and children suffering from abuse, and the skills required to take part in related volunteer activities. The participants were divided into four groups of different interests, and each group planned, organized, and at the end gave presentations on their project.

The "life and medical care" group I joined chose hunger as its topic. We were shocked at what we had learned about hunger in today's world, especially when we found out that it's an issue for us right here in Japan. We learned many things, like how there are over 800 million people starving in the world and like how 20 million tons of food is thrown away every year here in Japan — it could feed 70 million of those people for one year. We also learned that Japan received food aid from UNICEF as recently as 40 years ago.

We then thought, in order to solve this problem, instead of just giving away food, we ought to make it possible for people to obtain food by themselves. We considered various solutions and arrived at the idea that, if schools could provide food for children, the children would better be able to focus on their classes, boosting the enrollment rate at those schools, which would then lead their country to take more positive actions for the future. The six of us in our group came up with a plan to hold a charity event at a local elementary school to teach the kids about hunger, and raise funds that then would be sent to developing countries to support school lunch programs.

Learning into Action

After the workshop, our group got back together and decided that we would try to do what could be done to put our ideas into action. One-by-one we visited the shops in commercial districts near the elementary school where we would hold this event. We explained our activity and asked for donations in order to collect funds for our event. We thought that store owners might be reluctant to cooperate with a project by high school students they had never met, but we were able to raise more than twice as much as expected. It certainly was a pleasant surprise.

Many children participated in the event we held on a Sunday in December. We prepared the event carefully in order to help the children learn about hunger in the world and have fun at the same time. We created a display made of more than 20 large poster sheets of paper about the topic, held games such as soccer and quoits, and held a flea market where we sold stuffed animals and stationery goods collected at the high schools of our members. The children were surprised to see how children in some places in the world live in conditions that they never could



Participants at the Leadership Workshop exchanging ideas.

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have imagined. I had a sense that our goal of teaching children about hunger was a success. We donated the 15,000 yen we collected to the World Food Programme.

We got together three or four times a week to prepare for this

event, but it was time well spent, not only because of what we learned in the process about the problems of the world, but also because we thought about what we could do about them and how to put our ideas into action.

Spreading Our Message

Most of the participants of the leadership workshop continued their activities afterwards as our group did. In March 2008 we got involved in the “Youth International Volunteer Forum” (YouFo. See Japanese Culture Now-4) at which we gave presentations about what we had accomplished. Thirty-four students from a total of eight schools formed the executive committee of YouFo, taking part in its planning, operation, and public relations. I myself took part as vice chair of the executive committee.

At the forum, we set up four displays that described the results of the activities of the groups from the leadership workshop. We also had a lecture, sign language lessons, and a report from a youth volunteer mission about their work in Vietnam. There were over 200 participants, mostly young people, who gave positive feedback on a survey we conducted that day. Among the comments were: “I was astonished by what was achieved,” “It made me want to take part in volunteer activities, too,” and “This was an event I would love to attend every year.”



Posters explaining what we had learned about the problems of the world to visitors at the forum.

Thoughts and Lessons Learned

Many of my friends, who were in their first year of school when they took part in the leadership workshop and YouFo, are planning to participate in the next workshop and forum too, but I decided that I would no longer take part. I felt that I needed to focus on my studies in order to set the course of my life. Watch-



Flea market held at the elementary school to raise funds.

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ing more and more of my friends attending cram school, I have become more conscious of the need to study for my college entrance exams.

The YouFo executive committee meets once every month or two, but on top of this the officers meet two to three times a month and need to attend other group activities of their own. Meetings would last from five o'clock to nine o'clock on weekdays, which meant that I wouldn't be able to relax at home until ten o'clock in the evening. I would also have my share of work that I would bring home. It was a tough schedule, but I continued for that school year because I had committed myself to it.

There were times when I struggled with the frustration of being unable to attend the YouFo meetings because of school club and other activities. With other members also being frequently absent, it was a challenge to share our mutual information and ideas constructively. Some of the members, including myself, became concerned that we were putting more energy into the presentations about our volunteer activities than into the volunteering itself.

Nonetheless, I am glad that I was able to take part in these activities, from which I gained a great deal. Above all, I learned many things about hunger. I also learned the importance of working together as a group, as we discussed how we should set up our displays and incorporated everyone's ideas into the project. I learned how to have a good relationship with the group members and the people we were trying to help through the activities. I experienced the gratification and the sense of accomplishment from completing our task. There are many limitations when working with students from other schools, but it was a challenge I was willing to face. You feel really satisfied when a project you have worked hard on shows concrete results.

Participants and supporters are the most essential aspects of our activities. I want to spread the message to all the high school students that many of their peers are taking part in volunteer activities with compassion and determination. To do so, we need new ways to attract more high school students. Since students tend to shy away from activities described as “volunteer work,” perhaps we should avoid putting too much emphasis on the term. Instead we can relate the volunteer activities with things they are interested in, come up with catchy slogans, or something along those lines. This is probably my ultimate long-term project. My participation with YouFo may end, but I would like to continue thinking about this issue through volunteering with the committee.

My dream is to become a doctor. This is the path I chose since I have hoped to help others. When that day comes, my hope is to get involved in medical care for local communities.

* This school, like others in Japan, provides the six-years of secondary education (three years of junior high school and three years of senior high school) as a continuous program in one institution. Whereas most students completing nine years of compulsory education in Japan (six years for elementary school and three years for junior high school) take entrance examinations to enter high school, students entering this type of school do not have to prepare for high school entrance examinations and have more latitude in selecting what to study. Many private schools already combine junior and senior high school, but the first public school to do so was established in 1994 in Miyazaki prefecture. Other prefectures are now following suit.

❖ This article was compiled based on an interview with “Sean” (a nickname).