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智行“海星系列”丛书

# 海星讲故事

Starfish Sharing Stories



Chi Heng Foundation, a registered charity in Hong Kong, was founded in 1998. "Chi Heng" means putting wisdom into action, to help those who are in need.

Chi Heng's mission is to create a harmonious, equal, and healthy society by funding and operating projects in education and care for children and adults impacted by AIDS, AIDS prevention, and anti-discrimination. Its work focuses on the education of and holistic care for orphaned children and youth affected by AIDS ("AIDS-impacted orphans"), as well as providing AIDS preventive education to vulnerable groups and those at risk. It has provided support to AIDS-impacted orphans in central China since 2002, enabling them to continue their pursuit of education. As of Dec. 2011, it had cumulatively helped more than 13,000 AIDS-impacted orphans, among them junior school, high school, and university students. There are Chi Heng offices in various parts of China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Henan, Anhui, and Yunnan.

Chi Heng's efforts over the years have brought its work widespread recognition and commendation, including the One Foundation Philanthropy Award in 2010, as well as support from many individuals and organizations, such as UNESCO, The Global Fund, and The Clinton Foundation. Chi Heng has already completed many AIDS-impacted orphans assistance programs and AIDS prevention programs in China.

Chi Heng Foundation Canada (CHFC) is a Canadian-registered Non-Profit Organization established in 2005. It raises funds in North America to help finance the orphan support programs carried out by Chi Heng Foundation of Hong Kong.

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## **The Story of the Starfish**

An old man and his granddaughter are taking a walk on the beach on a beautiful evening. The picture perfect scenery, warmed by the setting sun, is spoilt by the thousands of starfish that are washed up by the sea and dying on the beach.

The old man picks one up and throws it back into the water.

His granddaughter is curious and says, "Why bother doing that, grandpa? There are too many of them!"

Picking up another starfish and throwing it into the water, the old man says to her, "To us, this is merely one in thousands, but to the starfish itself, this is everything."

The story of the starfish is very telling. To each and every orphan we reach out to, our efforts could mean everything to him and could change his life.

Drawing by an AIDS-impacted orphan



Xiao Hui, age 20, from Anhui.

His parents and brother are all victims of AIDS. His mother passed away in 2005.

### **The Voice from My Heart**

Everyone, please listen to the voice from my heart.  
I wish to have a friend,  
just like the other kids do.  
Everyday, my heart yearns for you,  
I hope to get to see you.  
In every stage of my life,  
at every little stop along the way,  
you will always hold my hand,  
bringing me close to you,  
telling me which way to go,  
and preventing me from sliding towards death.  
I need friends;  
I need the world to treat me as an equal.  
Let the world listen to our voices...

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Editor's words:

## **The Starfish Are Growing Up**

- By Zhu Chunlei

Following the publication of *Our Dreams Will Become Reality* and other earlier books in this "Chi Heng University Students' Reflections" book series, book no. 4 - *Starfish Sharing Stories* - has finally been launched. To us non-professionals in this field, the publication of every book emanated from an arduous process, with various staff members sacrificing their personal free time to undertake the book's planning, coordinating, editing, designing and proofreading.

Among the already published books, *University Students' Reflections* is a compilation of AIDS-impacted orphans' stories about their growing up, their unflagging struggles against adversity, and how they eventually succeed in getting into university through their own hard work. It serves as an inspiration and encouragement to their younger brothers and sisters to follow in their footsteps. *Passing On the Gift of Love* shows the world that an underprivileged group that has been aided by society can in turn contribute to society. An example of that is the Chi Heng-organized Wenchuan Earthquake Volunteers Group, whose charitable work for earthquake victims demonstrated that AIDS-impacted orphans are not a burden to society but are themselves bearers of love to others in need.

*Starfish Sharing Stories* is a collection of stories about "little starfish", some of whom strong and resilient, others feeling helpless or anxious. These stories have been written down by "older starfish", who grew up under similar circumstances and who now act as mini-journalists to lovingly record the stories of their younger peers. While writing about these "little starfish", they are also reflecting on their individual experiences from the time they themselves were at that age. As a result, every story here is infused with the love and compassion shown by an "older starfish". Collectively, these stories are representative of the present situations of thousands of "little starfish".

The planning and publication of this book can be traced back to the sponsored university students' summer volunteer work of July - August 2011, which was part of Chi Heng's Community Self Help Support Program. By June 2012, 1,150 university students had cumulatively come under the sponsorship of Chi Heng, 400 of whom had already graduated. Since 2005, Chi Heng has organized groups of sponsored university students to return to their home villages in the summer to tutor younger kids and engage them in various activities, as well as do home visits in other villages. One of the summer activities of 2011 was to have each university student act as a reporter to write about a child or a family among the many they had visited. At the closing ceremonies of the summer volunteer work, these stories were read out, and a contest was held for the best ones. Among them, 36 touching stories of children and families in central and southwest China were selected for inclusion in this book. After reading these stories, you will learn about what a group of desolate people there exists in this world, and will come to realize that you ought to be thankful for and cherish the life you have as well as those around you. Compared to the appalling lives of these children, what more could we ask for in ours? Of course, aside from such a realization, I hope that we can also join forces to provide love and support to this desolate group. Ensuring that they grow up healthy requires all of us to do whatever we can

to help, and this in turn will contribute towards creating a harmonious, equal, and healthy society.

Many people are to be thanked for the successful publication of this book. First of all, I would like to thank the various authors for recording these true and touching stories with acute observations during their hot summer break. Thanks also to volunteers Zi Qiongjie, Suen Hongyan, and Wu Peixia for proofreading; to my colleague Chen Zhaodi and Zhang Zhen for their tremendous assistance and support with editing; to Wei Fangqi for her beautiful hand-drawn artwork used for our front cover, utilizing a drift bottle and starfish to express the meaning behind this book; and to Zhu Yanru for her contribution in the overall design and planning of this book and of the front cover, as well as the important role she played in editing. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues in the Beijing office Kong Zhouzhou, Luo Jiaxu, Guo Lingyan, and Zhang Jingyi for their suggestions and support. This book, now before you, is the end product of the collective efforts of many people, collaborating professionally with each other and working diligently together as a team.

The Chi Heng extended family listens to your voice, like the way the drift bottle listens to the voices of many little starfish - what it is that troubles you, what it is that delights you, what your dreams are, and what the future has in store for you. I wish that, one day, people in our community will come together and act like the ocean, embracing all the starfish, and treating each individual "starfish" with equality.



## Foreword

### **Witness to Their Growing Up and the Passing On of The Gift of Love**

- Chung To

Throughout my extensive travels all these years, no matter where I am, I always keep thinking of the children who are in need of help in the villages. Even though I have never taken a break from this volunteer work, it has always been apparent to me that there is a limit to what I can do. In towns and villages already reached by Chi Heng, the student sponsorship coverage is now close to 100%, but in areas not yet reached by Chi Heng, there are still way too many school-aged children who are seeing their childhood wasted away because they do not have the money for schooling. What will become of their future? Even if we manage to raise enough funds for them a few years from now, they will, by then, have been out of school for too long and will have missed out on a once-in-a-lifetime chance to obtain an education. They may have become lost, unable to play a useful role in society.

I find it hard to dispel this worry. It is often said that the most we can do in life is to try our best, but when you have witnessed their plight with your own eyes, it is not something that you can ever ignore or forget, and doing my best does not seem adequate anymore. This feeling of powerlessness keeps creeping up on me.

On the other hand, as I watch them grow, when I read their letters conveying voices from their hearts, or when I hear of someone inspired by Chi Heng's ideals and charitable work and commit in action to help others in need, be they AIDS-impacted orphans or other underprivileged people in society, I can't help but feel a special gratification, knowing that there is love in this world after all, and, in turn, I am a bit more hopeful about the future of those children.

Those children come from extremely poor, often broken families impacted by AIDS. Back then, their outlook was bleak, and they faced prejudice everywhere they turned. They could not even have dreamed of having the kind of social life that normal people take for granted. Yet, now, they have an education, a career, and for some, even their own family. They have already managed to travel far in life's journey, are able to experience the joys and sorrows normal people encounter in everyday life, and appear to have been liberated from the darkness that AIDS shrouded them with in their early years.

Witnessing their growth and achievements enables me to again re-evaluate the work of Chi Heng, finding it to be of value after all. Even though there is a limit to how many children we can help, to those at the receiving end, their lives have indeed undergone a fundamental change. Seeing such results gives me great consolation.

I believe that everybody possesses wisdom and compassion and will extend a helping hand when encountering others in need, thus becoming another "starfish saver" in society. To the children receiving assistance, every bit of effort we make will impact their lives and help change their fate.

Now, let us listen to their voices...

## **The Work and Activities of Chi Heng Sponsored University Students**

- By Zhu Chunlei, President  
Chi Heng University Students Alumni Association

The meaning of "Chi Heng" is to transform wisdom into action. Our founder, Mr. Chung To, once said: "One of my objectives in establishing this foundation is to enable more children to pursue an education, so that they won't be left behind due to poverty." Hence, education sponsorship is an important aspect of the work of Chi Heng Foundation ("CHF"), and enabling children to advance to university studies is a goal of this sponsorship. As of June 2012, CHF had sponsored over 1,156 students, with more than 700 still in school, and over 400 already graduated. The graduates are currently spread throughout the country pursuing different professions, thus contributing to society in their own ways. Their success illustrates the remarkable results of our work.

In order to expand the knowledge of the Chi Heng university students, broaden their vision, and enhance their practical skills, CHF annually organizes community outreach opportunities and a variety of other work and activities for them, focusing on community self help and the tutoring of younger peers. Their work includes home visits, conducting hobby workshops, photography groups, art groups, data processing and filing, doing social enterprise surveys, and the May 2012 Sichuan earthquake relief project. Other activities include vocational training and career development, university student social gatherings, participation in marathons, and summer camps in Hong Kong. In order to induce more people into charitable social work to help others who are disadvantaged, we have established the Chi Heng University Students Alumni Association, the future development of which is aimed at spreading the ideals of CHF, and passing on the gift of love.

Home visits form the basis of our work. CHF volunteers personally visit AIDS-impacted families, to show compassion and care to the AIDS-impacted children, find out about their families' situation and needs, and explore better ways to help them. These visits also provide valuable feedback to CHF offices, so that they can more effectively co-ordinate assistance to them in the future. At every summer and winter break, we organize our sponsored university students to conduct such home visits. Whether in bitter cold or sizzling heat, they always throw in 100% of their effort to visit every family that needs help, tell their own Chi Heng stories to their younger peers, and encourage them to work hard at school so that they too can realize their dreams. Such words coming from the mouths of CHF-sponsored university students are far more convincing than if they are to come from CHF staff. This way, as the university students achieve their own potential, they are also helping and inspiring the next generation to follow in their footsteps. At the same time, the stipend they receive from doing this work also helps lighten their own financial burden. In the summer of 2011, up to 100 university students participated in such home visits, visiting close to 8,000 families spread over 8 provinces.

Starting with the summer of 2007, Chi Heng has organized annual free tutoring classes conducted by university students for AIDS-impacted junior school and high school students in the villages, to enrich the young children during their summer and winter holidays. Other than providing a full and vibrant curriculum, the university students also share their interesting and exciting university experiences with them. This way, those who have

received help are in turn helping others in need, and the gift of love gets passed on. In addition, photography groups, art groups, data processing and filing, and social enterprise surveys round out a multi-faceted and rich summer experience for the university students, allowing their abilities to be put to good use, and at the same time furthering the knowledge of the younger generation of village kids.

Prior to embarking on their summer work, the university students receive professional training from CHF, geared towards the specific tasks they will be performing in the villages. Upon completion of their summer work, the students debrief, reflect on their experiences and lessons learned, and provide valuable suggestions to CHF for improving future summer programs. Conducted concurrently with the training and debriefing sessions are CHF organized tours to historic sites, well-known enterprises, prominent academic institutions, and other places of interests, excursions that serve to broaden the students' horizon and knowledge. Examples of these destinations include The Great Wall, Standard Chartered Bank, China.com.cn, and Tsinghua University. Overall, the summer activities each year provide excellent training and practical opportunities for the CHF-sponsored university students. I believe that their lives have been enriched as a result, and that they will have an even brighter future!

The horrors of the May 2012 Wenchuan Earthquake still linger on in our memory. At the time of this crisis, CHF organized 22 university student volunteers to provide relief in the Sichuan disaster zone. They spent 40 days in Beichuan, Pengzhou, Chongzhou, and Long Men Shan Township, visiting victims, providing them with assistance, and showing them that there were people who cared about them. Just before the onset of deep winter, 16 of the students returned to the disaster zone to distribute supplies such as cooking oil, gloves, and socks. Their work received recognition and praise from local villagers, partners, and government officials, and the Chi Heng name became known throughout the region. At the same time, these students have proven that they are not weaklings or burdens to society, but are willing and capable to give back to society.

In order to support the continued development of CHF and enhance its financial sustainability so that we could help more people in the long run, we started venturing into social enterprises. It so happened that, by July 2007, eight vocational training and career development workshops for university graduates had been completed, and 260 students had successfully passed their final exams and obtained their qualifying certificates, but the general lack of employment opportunities for university graduates at that time was a great concern. Marrying social enterprising and the need to improve job opportunities, CHF started offering microfinance loans to the participants of the first vocational training and career development workshop in the summer of 2009, to help them establish their own businesses back home. Our hope is for future CHF graduates to join and develop CHF's social enterprises, so that we could achieve our triple objectives - create employment opportunities for our graduates, lessen society's burden, and help develop CHF in the long run.

Another activity worth mentioning, which is also the most popular activity among our university students, is the annual Hong Kong Standard Chartered Marathon. Each year since 2007, a select group of distinguished Chi Heng students have participated in this marathon. The trip to Hong Kong provides them with the opportunity to experience this cosmopolitan city and international financial center. They are always deeply fascinated by the cultural background and values there, which are different from what they grew up with. The visit

inspires them to work harder at acquiring knowledge and to aim higher in life. At the same time, to be hosted by Hong Kong people enables them to realize that many more people in this world care about them and love them. Similarly, two consecutive years of summer camps in Hong Kong for university students from Mainland China have the same effect on the participants. Let love be without boundary, let care be without region, and let love live on forever!

The Hong Kong Marathon sparked our students' interest to also participate in the Zhengzhou-to-Kaifeng International Marathon, which is a combination of sports and socializing, as participants get to make many new friends during the event. Close to 100 students participated in it in 2012. Furthermore, different formats of university student social gatherings are held in different cities each year, to strengthen the bond among CHF students, allow them to understand CHF's work better, and enable the gift of love to be passed on and on forever.

I hope that the above introduction to the work and activities of CHF-sponsored university students have given you a deeper understanding of the Chi Heng Foundation, and I also hope that you will further your support of our work. I would very much welcome your joining our endeavors and becoming part of our family. Let us work together, be diligent at school, put wisdom into action, and keep passing on the gift of love in order to help more people in need.

## **The Story of Hung Hung**

The darkness of the night has given me a pair  
of black-colored eyes, but I use it to search for  
light. As to misery, we can in fact face it with  
smiles.

- Xiao Liang

This summer, I participated in Chi Heng's summer work for university students, doing both home visits and tutoring.

The main objective of Chi Heng is to sponsor children from AIDS-impacted families, to enable them to complete their education. I visited many such families these couple of weeks, a task that left me with profound feelings.

Among the families visited, the one that left me with the deepest impression is the family of Hung Hung. Although their village was surrounded with beautiful trees, the village roads were full of potholes and the houses were of varying qualities. Furthermore, getting there was a challenge due to the inadequacy of public transportation.

On the surface, this village did not look much different from others, but in its northeast corner, there were a few very dilapidated houses, and that was where Hung Hung and her family lived. On the day of my home visit, Hung Hung's younger brother was out, and only she, her mother, and her grandmother were home. They were sitting in the courtyard enjoying the breeze and were very happy to see us coming. They enthusiastically invited us to sit down with them, and we soon started chatting away.

As we were talking, I took a look around and noticed that there was only half a perimeter wall surrounding the courtyard. There was not even a single unbroken window among the three ramshackle mud-built rooms. Such an old and decrepit building seemed to be denouncing to any passerby the unfairness and helplessness of fate.

When we entered their house, we saw that the main room was cramped and rather messy. Some very old clothes were lumped together on one end of the bed. On two sides of the main room were back rooms. It was completely dark inside, and I could not see any furniture that looked even semi-decent. It is apt to use the phrase "four blank walls" to describe such a dwelling.

I could see in Hung Hung's eyes a kind of tranquility not commensurate with her age. Hung Hung's father and uncle both died of AIDS, and her mother was undergoing AIDS treatment. Even more unfortunate was that both Hung Hung and her younger brother were a bit mentally challenged.

To many backward and impoverished villages in China, this AIDS episode was no doubt a disaster. During the 1990s, some blood collection agencies, lured by profit, engaged in illegal practices while encouraging peasants to sell blood. After they extracted the serum from the blood sellers, they mixed the remaining blood plasma of different people together

and then transfused it back to them. Once the blood of one AIDS sufferer got into the mix, the virus was then spread to others by this re-transfusion, and a disaster thus befell the villagers. Areas in Henan and Anhui were particularly hard hit. Many children lost their parents, and many families lost their loved ones, along with any shadow of a decent life. Hung Hung's family is an example - among the three infected, two have already passed away. How heavy a blow that must have been to the young and the elderly!

Hung Hung's painful story is just one of many in the Wanbei area that were caused by poverty and ignorance. More than 10 years ago, in order to make ends meet and get out of poverty, Hung Hung's family engaged in selling blood. They had done this before, but this time, they went to sell blood at an illegal blood collection station in Wanbei. What they did not know was that this particular station was not following the proper rules and regulations for such practice, and, as a result, they all contracted HIV from this blood sale. The frightening part is that, right afterwards, they were unaware that they had been infected because of the long incubation period of HIV, nor did they know that a bigger tragedy was just lurking beneath the surface, and that a domino-like chain catastrophe could happen at any time.

One day, Hung Hung's father came down with the flu. Yet, different from similar flu illnesses in the past, this time his low fever just would not go away, and he also suffered from diarrhea. The eventual diagnosis - that her father had developed AIDS - brought despair to the whole family, and he died not long afterwards. What followed was not difficult to imagine. Her uncle met the same tragic fate, and her mother is still battling the disease today with her frail body, sustained only by medication.

In a short period of time, this family lost two able-bodied men, which was undoubtedly a disaster. Hung Hung's grandparents were already in their seventies, an age at which they should be enjoying life with a full family, but what they got instead was funeral after funeral of their beloved children. In the face of these painful tragedies, their tears had already run dry long ago.

On the way back, my spirit remained unsettled, as I was overwhelmed by the misfortune that had befallen Hung Hung's family. How much did I wish that everyone in the world could be free from pain and suffering and live a happy life!

As the sun started to set and its remaining rays hit my face, I knew that what followed would be darkness. Since we are able to accept darkness, we should be able to emerge from it to welcome another dawn. I firmly believe that, as long as we remain strong and resilient, we will get to the day when we will see light again.

## Springtime Comes even for The Wild Chrysanthemum

This is a story about Xiao Ke, but is also a story about myself. I feel that I am like a wild Chrysanthemum growing by the edge of an open field. Even though the soil there is not fertile, and no gardener tends to me, I can still bloom fervently. All we need to do is to embrace a grateful heart and live with courage, and we will still be able to take in all the fragrances of the field.

- Cao Gen Er

Having applauded the warmth and optimism of spring and soaked up the free-spirited enthusiasm of summer, in this withering autumn season comes the springtime of your life. Although you grow on a slope by the roadside, where there is no fertile soil or the care of any gardener, you still bloom with such magnificence, with no hint of wilting. Such is the wild Chrysanthemum - resilient, optimistic, and beautiful wild Chrysanthemum.

The main character in this story is Xiao Ke, born 14 years ago into a poor peasant family in Henan. She is a positive and cheerful girl who will be attending the second year of junior high school after this summer.

The story had a happy beginning. A family of four - a hard working father, a loving mother, a smart son, and the adorable Xiao Ke - were living an impoverished but contented life. They had their share of small problems every now and then, but overall, life was rather uneventful. Most importantly, they were happily together all the time. However, even such a family could not escape its twisted fate, when, out of the blue, a disaster robbed them of joy and replaced it with doom and gloom.

In the 1990s, a get-rich-quick scheme - the selling of blood - spread like wildfire in a large rural area. It rapidly pulled some people out of poverty and provided them with sufficient funds to upgrade from a mud house to a clay house. Such enticing rewards attracted everyone eligible to jump on the bandwagon. In order to provide his children with a better life, Xiao Ke's father, too, joined in the selling of blood. Little did he know at the time that this decision would bring calamity to the family ten years down the road.

Around the turn of the century, word started spreading in the village about a mysterious illness - AIDS. It was said that there was no cure, and that whoever contracted it would inevitably die within a few years. This piece of news caused instant panic among those who had sold blood, and, of course, this included Xiao Ke's father. Indeed, he died of AIDS several years later, a personal loss that caused irreparable damage to young Xiao Ke's tender soul.

I first came across Xiao Ke three years ago, when I participated in Chi Heng's summer work program for the first time. It was not long after her father passed away, and I can still vividly recall that, during the home visit, tears would fill her eyes whenever we talked about her father. In the Chi Heng hobby class, I noticed that she was quite introverted and did not



much like to talk, reminding me of the way I myself was when I lost my own father. Hence, I particularly paid more attention to her and tried to strike up more conversations with her. I remember once saying to her, "The past is already behind us, and we cannot change it. The future has not yet happened, and we cannot control it. All we can do is to seize the present moment and make the best of it, so that we will have no regrets."

This year, I met her again at a Chi Heng summer hobby class. Today's Xiao Ke is no longer the shy, introverted girl she was three years ago, but has grown into a vivacious, positive, and cheerful young lady. At school, she actively participates in the various summer activities organized by Chi Heng and excels in them, receiving compliments from her teachers and fellow students. In a speech contest, her group came second. She also stood out in her cheerleading team, and helped her teammates in refining their moves. She excelled on her martial arts team as well, winning repeated praise from her master. Her sparkling eyes no longer harbor the melancholy and vulnerability of the past, but are now full of optimism and confidence. At home, She ably helps out with doing most of the housework, including washing, cooking, and cleaning. This is necessary because her brother is away, and her mother needs to leave home early each day to work small jobs at a construction site, only returning late in the evening.

During the course of my interaction with Xiao Ke this past summer, I discovered that she had already emerged from the shadow of her father's passing. When I mentioned him, she would just nonchalantly say, "It has been so long since that happened, why bother thinking about it again? I have since learned to be independent, and to take care of me and my family." I was very happy to hear her say that. I am glad that she has learned to leave the dark cloud of unhappy times behind her in order to become mature, self-reliant, and positive.

Growing up is a process we all go through. Only with time and its associated trials and tribulations can we go from naïveté to maturity, from dependence to self-reliance, and from cowardice to courage. Very often, after all the ordeals that lead to a transformation, the transformation itself can occur at the blink of an eye. Just like the wild Chrysanthemum that grows on a slope by the roadside, even an adverse environment cannot hold back its splendid smiles. After the allure of spring and the baptism of summer, the wild Chrysanthemum can still bloom radiantly in the withering autumn to welcome its own springtime.

## The Weeping Flower

Our parents are always the ones we want to depend on.

Don't cry, Xiao Yu, as you still have this big family called Chi Heng.

Be strong! Be brave!

- Xiao Mi

15, an age when a girl is as beautiful as a blooming flower, when there should be no worries in life, and when she should be enjoying the warmth and love of her parents, yet, for her, life's torments came way too early. Although I had already done a whole year of home visits and was well prepared to come face to face with the devastation and suffering caused by HIV, when I visited Xiao Yu's home, I still could not help but break down and cry.

Xiao Yu's mother died of AIDS when she was four years old. Five years later, her father followed suit. This tremendous upheaval in the family caused her older brother's schoolwork to take a nosedive, and, two years ago, he quit school to take a job. Xiao Yu and her elderly grandmother were the only ones remaining at home, caring for and supporting each other.

Let us go back to the 1990s, when this story began. Life was hard in the village back then, nobody could get enough to eat, and most people were just barely scraping by. At that time, a wave of blood selling gradually swept through the area. Many people repeatedly sold blood for years to earn extra cash. Due to ignorance, they were unaware that the primitive sanitary conditions of the blood collection practice were deadly for them. At that time, there was even a popular saying going around in all the villages, "just extend your arm and RMB 45 will fall into your palm." Needless to say, Xiao Yu's parents also hopped on the bandwagon. However, not long after they started selling blood, the government realized the danger the practice engendered and banned it. Thereafter, Xiao Yu's parents could only pray that the weather would cooperate and give them a good harvest, so that their young children and the elderly grandmother could get enough to eat and enough to wear. However, as the days went by, what was awaiting them instead?

When Xiao Yu was 4, her mother began to feel unwell. At the beginning, she merely lost her appetite. As she did not have enough money to go see a doctor at the hospital, she just bought some generic drugs at the village clinic, in the hope that the symptoms would soon go away. Unfortunately, more than six months went by, and her health had only worsened. Xiao Yu's father then borrowed some money from family and friends to take his wife to the city hospital, but even there, they were not able to do anything for her. As she became more and more ill, she refused to take any more prescription drugs, because they cost money, and whatever could be sold at home had already been sold. Besides, the family still owed others a lot of debt. Everyday, staring at her young children and anxious husband, all she could wish for was to be able to spend just one more day with them. Eventually, she passed away at the end of that year, full of reluctance and attachment to this world. Even at her passing, she did not know what disease had killed her.

Xiao Yu was not even 5 at that time. Thereafter, the term 'mother' became merely a notion to her, because a child at that age really could not understand the concept of separation or life and death. All she knew was that she no longer had a mother. Whenever she pleaded to her father to see her mother, her father would tell her, "Your mother has turned into a star in the sky, keeping an eye on you from above everyday. You'd better behave, as she watches you all the time." Xiao Yu would look at her father and nod, but it was not clear if she truly understood it all. From then on, Xiao Yu would find herself sitting on a chair every evening and looking at the twinkling stars in the sky...

As time passed, Xiao Yu and her older brother were slowly growing up, and that was comforting to their father. Although it was a challenge for him to support and care for two children and an elderly mother, at least life was uneventful. Unfortunately, misfortune was not done with this hapless family. Xiao Yu's father began to feel weak, as if his body was drained of energy. Around this time, many others in the village were tested positive for HIV. He put the pieces together, linking this phenomenon to his own ailment and the one that had killed his wife, and chills went down his spine. He quietly went to the hospital to be checked out, and indeed, he too turned out to have been infected. He knew that his days were numbered, but he wanted to do something for his children while he was still able to. He worked as hard as he could, and managed to earn enough to have three beautiful clay rooms built for his family. However, a combination of overwork and the lack of medication to control his illness eventually caused his collapse, and his eyes closed for good a month later. Xiao Yu was only 10 that year.

We will never know how much reluctance accompanied Xiao Yu's father when he left this world. Still, the heavens were not finished playing tricks with this unfortunate family. In a subsequent test, Xiao Yu was also found to be HIV-positive. The rest you already know - her brother quit school to find work, and her grandmother was already elderly...

This series of events made Xiao Yu a very quiet and withdrawn girl. We do not know how much pain and agony was going on inside her, and we dared not ask what she aspired to in the future, in fear that we would touch a nerve.

## **A Boat in the Middle of the Ocean**

There is no greater misery than this for  
anyone on earth. We cannot share his  
suffering. We can only hope that the love of  
Chi Heng will wipe away his tears, so that he  
will not feel lonesome anymore.

- Xiao Jing

Wanderers on earth have nobody to rely on. In the deepest depth of sorrow, all you can find is a void. This is the story of Sweet Melon:

"I do not aspire to become a seafaring pirate; I just want to survive. I am not an incurable problem child; I merely want to be free from the evil claws of the selfish hypocrites and rely on my own means to live on with dignity. Even when I steal, I am merely stealing a lease on life.

"My name is Sweet Melon, as that is what everybody calls me. Therefore, I will not forget my name no matter what happens. I am sure that I had parents, but they both passed away from illness more than six years ago, so I have long forgotten what they looked like. I am also sure that I had an older sister, but she went away with my mother without saying goodbye, and so I too have forgotten everything about her. I am sure that I once had a grandfather too, and he was very kind to me. However, he died in a traffic accident three years ago, and as time passes, my memory of him is becoming fuzzy. Unfortunately, the one thing I have always wanted to forget - the mourning pole used at his funeral - I am unable to erase from my memory. I can also vividly recall the face of the kind beggar who took me under his wings, even though I never consciously made an effort to memorize it. Worst of all, the wicked faces of my uncle and aunt, who repeatedly and abusively beat me, are forever ingrained in my memory.

"After my parents passed away, only the government household registry remained aware of what my birthday is. I have been told that I am twelve years old now. Following my father's passing, my mother refused to listen to my plea and insisted on remarrying with my sister and me in tow, but, in the end, she was not able to bring me along to her new home. I hate her for this and swore that I would never want to see her again until the day we were both six feet under. When she died, I buried her with my father. Their bodies have probably rotted away by now.

"After that, I lived with my grandparents. There was enough to eat, and the two elderly folks truly loved and cared about me. Sometimes, I even enjoyed the additional freedom from not having my parents look over my shoulder! Unfortunately, the good times did not last. One day three years ago, the terrible news came of my grandfather's traffic accident, and he died of his injuries soon afterwards. All of a sudden, all hell broke loose in the house - my sister wailed incessantly, and my uncles and aunts argued to no end over compensation issues. Other than grandfather's smiling portrait, the two old clay rooms standing there in silent salute, and the adorable but puzzled cat, there was no longer any serenity on earth.

"On the day of grandfather's funeral, they wanted me to carry the mourning pole. I kept begging them, "What I dread most is to carry the mourning pole. Could you not make me carry it?" Yet, they insisted on having me carry it. The evening after the funeral, while grandmother was still in deep mourning, my uncles and aunts started to divide up grandfather's possessions. Very quickly, stacks and stacks of paper bills were parceled out and grabbed up among them. Only after a long while did they get around to the subject of my care and upbringing. At this point, I became a hot potato that nobody wanted to touch, and my eldest uncle declared outright that he was not going to be bothered with looking after me.

"All I knew at that point was that my grandfather had died, the relatives were divvying up his money, and grandmother was crying more inconsolably than when my father died. I thought at the time that that was the peak of my misery, but only later did I realize that it was just the beginning. Amidst their noisy squabbling, I fell asleep on the threshold. I thought I would dream of my father or grandfather, their lovely smiles, and a beautiful starry sky, but no, there was only a pitch-black sky, and I found myself immersed in an icy ocean. Stretching endlessly in all directions were not just infinite amounts of seawater, but also darkness, bitter cold, fear, even despair. The only thing I could cling on to was a wretched piece of tree bark. I desperately swam and swam, but the shore was nowhere to be found. Time and again, any glimmer of hope was only followed by despondence.

"When I awoke, I had already been placed into the home of my younger uncle. Not that he and his wife were not generous, but life was difficult for them too. They already had four children to take care of, so it was not surprising that they could spare no time or resources for me, particularly when I, at that age, was in a growth phase and had an increasing appetite. Therefore, I was really not in a position to complain when I did not get enough to eat, but it soon became apparent that my aunt increasingly disliked me.

"I came up with a way to satisfy my stomach - stealing. At the beginning, I just stole scrap metal to sell, but as I grew bolder, I started stealing money. This enabled me to no longer go hungry for quite a while, and, being an optimist with simple needs, I was very happy. I therefore decided that, from then on, I would regularly steal. I did not feel ashamed of it because it was my only means of survival. To this day, I still remember that, during one burglary, I even ate the half bowl of cold congee someone left on his dining table.

"Later on, I became part of a four-member gang, working collaboratively on frequent thefts and burglaries, and our notoriety spread far and wide. However, when the pendulum swings too far, it always comes back with force. As our victims repeatedly came to my uncle's house to complain about what I had done, my aunt, who was already disgusted with me, gave me a fierce beating. Injured, I ran away for five days. I later heard that when my uncle failed to find me, he in turn gave my aunt a fierce beating. Then, in frustration, my aunt tried to commit suicide by ingesting poison but was saved just in time.

"The Buddha says that everyone is equal. Well, I too have a right to live, do I not? What I stole was insignificant to them but was life saving to me, yet if they were so mean, how could I possibly survive?

"In order to survive, I came up with yet another idea - panhandling. I put on a broken straw hat, carried a broken bowl in my hand, and knelt at a busy part of town to do my begging. Soon afterwards, I met my savior - my 'big brother' beggar, who had been panhandling for

years and was very experienced. What stood him out was that he always wore a string of CDs on his neck, so I called him 'CD big brother'. He was very kind, and, seeing how miserable I was, he graciously shared with me the food he got from his panhandling. From then on, I tagged along with him wherever he went begging. By his side, I once again had a sense of security that I had not had for a long time.

"Some time later, a woman who claimed to be my mother came to take me home with her. Maybe I had been a drifter for too long and yearned for some stability. I found myself willingly going with her to her home in Shandong province. However, as the novelist Sanmao said, "If your mind is not at rest, wherever you go, you will still be adrift." In less than a week, I was back on my never-ending journey as a wanderer.

"This time, I had no money with me when I ran away from her home. I ended up at the train station, stole my way on to the train, and managed to evade the officer who went around the train to check passengers' tickets. When I got hungry, I just sneaked into the dining car to eat the leftover food there. Only when I was caught and kicked off the train did I realize that I had got on to the wrong train and had arrived in Ningxia, a remote autonomous region in northwest China. This time, I was truly scared, shivering non-stop as I walked out of the train station. The eternally optimistic me finally broke down and cried.

"I wandered around aimlessly, although, deep down inside, I knew that I could eventually get home if I kept heading south. Before I left home, everywhere I went felt homey, but since leaving home, nowhere had felt like home. People gave me the cold shoulder in this big city, making even begging challenging. It was deep fall in Ningxia, and all I had on was a thin shirt. The chill, combined with hunger, finally made me sick. I felt so weak that I had no energy to walk any further. All I wanted at that point was to get some sleep, so I found a ditch and decided to sleep there for the night. When I awoke, I felt even chillier, and I was hungrier and weaker. I never took illness seriously when I was home, but now, how I wished to have a doctor and some medicine from him! I did not want to die, so I drummed up my courage to try to get up, but my strength had left me. All I could do was to lie there in the wilderness, stare at the night sky, and watch a shooting star fall towards the horizon. I thought of the little girl who sold matches, my father, my mother, grandfather, grandmother, my teachers, and my little friends. I seemed to see candlelight, a sumptuous meal, and a warm bed. Oh! That had to be the resting place of orphans, so I smiled with joy, but the angels cried and even started to sing this song from Mianyuan Township:

Both my feet are heavy and aching, the road in the wilderness is never-ending.

The moon is dark as the night falls, shrouded in sadness and full of sorrow.

Up on the mound the stars are fuzzy, which way home is my heart's quandary.

My body is covered with weeds after passing through the broken bridge; I am half full of dirt  
after falling into the puddle.

People are evil, see who is getting hurt. Only the angel is kind and sends the hapless orphan  
home.

The night breeze is mild, and stars shine gently in the clear sky.

Buddha's light shines for miles to comfort those who are frightened, but I am still unable to  
fall asleep amidst the heavy dew and frost.

If the angels ever cry, they will surely be called back to Heaven.

"I did not know how much more time had elapsed, but when I woke up again, I found that I had not died. The police had sent me back to my old home in Henan - the home I was

longing for that night not too long ago. However, although I was back, nothing had changed - those who were happy remained happy, and those who were sad remained sad. I was doomed by my fate, and my laments were eternal.

"Grandmother was ill in the hospital, and my eldest uncle and I were living under the same roof. I no longer engaged in theft, and instead was learning to cook so that I would not go hungry again, but my uncle still evicted me from the house. Fortunately, a kindhearted schoolmate let me stay with him.

"These days, while sleeping at night, I still often dream of hanging on to a tree bark and swimming in icy water in the middle of a never-ending darkness, and I frequently wake up in a cold sweat. Out of my twelve years of existence, I have been a drifter for six years. Time flies, but I am still bumping around looking for a not-too-chilly harbor. I rarely look myself in the mirror, but lately, I have found that I more and more resemble a bitter melon - rough and uneven on the outside, bitter on the inside.

"Fate is so unfair to me, yet I have nowhere to complain. Looked at individually, there is not a bad person around me, but, collectively, they constitute my tragic fate. I do not blame the government, nor do I blame society at large. When even a beggar sympathizes with me, shows me pity and helps me, what is there for me to complain about?

"Passerby Miss B once paid me a home visit, but what made me remember her was the time I ran into her on the street. She asked what I would do if I had 5 acres of land. When I could not come up with an answer, she said, "If it were me, I would plant beans in one acre, rice in another, vegetables in yet another, and lease the other two acres to you." She then left with a smile. It was then that I understood - she was reminding me that I still had two acres of land. Two acres of land, two acres of green...ocean is green...and hope is green!"

Passerby B was not the first one to have heard the story of Sweet Melon. After all, a passerby should be no more than a mere passerby. Why did she have the audacity to give Sweet Melon hope? This is because the big family of Chi Heng will use action with wisdom to build a green sailboat and a navigational light for him, so that, even though the seawater is ice cold, at least he will have the power and the direction to go forward, and will no longer be struggling helplessly in the cold, dark ocean.

There is an old saying, "When one encounters extreme difficulty and exhaustion, one can't help but cry out for divine intervention or for his parents' help." Sweet Melon has never asked for divine help, nor has he cried out for his parents' help. He possesses such an inner strength that all he needs to do is to make use of Chi Heng's green sailboat, and he can sail out of this ocean of misery on his own power.



## **Blessings Are Not Beyond Reach**

There is no absolute fairness in the world, so  
do not waste time pursuing something  
unattainable. Pick up the pieces, hold on to  
whatever thin blessings we have, and our  
lives can still be full of splendor.

- Xiao Feng

What are blessings? There is actually no clear definition, as everybody has a different notion of what constitutes blessings, and each person has a scale in his own mind for weighing the extent of blessings.

My name is Xiao Shuai. I am 18 this year and am from a little village in Henan province. My family was dirt poor when I was young, so much so that my parents could not afford to pay for my older sister's schooling when other kids her age started school, and she only began to go to school when she was older. However, we still considered ourselves well blessed at the time, because our whole family was always together and never separated.

At home, my parents were the pillars of the family. They bore the burden of any difficulties and provided us with only warmth and happiness. Their whole purpose was to enable us to grow up happily. Despite my being mischievous, I always knew my limits, and even though I was the youngest male in the family, I understood what responsibility meant, as the saying "young people don't know any worries" did not apply to me. The first thing my father taught me was about honesty - whatever situation I encountered, I had to remain honest, have the courage to face up to it, and be willing to accept my responsibility without any pretense.

At school, the concept of "your abilities create your own world; change your fate with knowledge" was already deeply ingrained within me. Perhaps because the opportunity to attend school did not come easy, I particularly cherished it. All children like to play, but I knew that learning was of paramount importance at school. Hence, being able to study and grow up happily became my biggest goal in life. Though not affluent, at least I was very happy then.

Maybe we were so well blessed that even the heavens became jealous. When my parents were tested positive for HIV, the splendid warmth of spring suddenly turned into a raw, wintry cold. Their sudden illness took away any sense of blessings, leaving only a looming, dark shadow over my family. My life seemed to have fallen into a quagmire, hardly able to move forward. People's indifference, sarcasm, and alienation made me realize what the term "cold harsh world" meant. I really did not understand, nor could I figure out, why others with equally painful and incurable diseases such as cancer received so much sympathy and care, but people like us were ostracized and despised. What did we do wrong? Had we done any harm to those who were healthy? The answer is no. We had not done anything at all, yet we could not escape their contempt and indifference.

Who wants to be ill? We, the sick and the ones close to the sick, have our own dignity too. We too can feel sad and despondent. Many a time, as I awakened from my nightmare with a

jolt, all I could do was to swallow all the torment by myself. Under the circumstances, I could only mount a silent defiance. How I wished all this were only a bad dream, so that when I awakened, everything would be back to the way it was.

In the face of disease, dad and mom chose to confront their gloomy existence head on and endure all their unhappiness with a positive frame of mind. Life is like a movie. Although the ending is already predetermined, we can still choose to color the course of it with brilliance, much like how fireworks give off that split-second spectacle. Life is never perfect, but we can find an alternative means to fill our void and still be able to capture life's splendor. That way, we can show heaven and earth that we did bloom once.

For the sake of my sister and me, Dad and mom worked tirelessly all day long. They did not mind much about what they would get to eat or wear; they were solely focused on enabling us to complete our education. Eventually, dad fell ill one day, and the illness lasted for more than a month. I was so worried that his health would be gone for good, but the heavens listened to my pleas, and he gradually recovered, allaying my concern.

Just when I thought everything was okay, my dad fell into sickness again, followed by my mom. As my parents' health increasingly worsened, life became harder and harder. The sense of helplessness crystallized the air of gloominess around us, as if to suffocate us. However, right at our lowest point, as if by divine intervention, Chi Heng entered our lives with an unstoppable force. It transformed our gloominess into the spring sun's warmth, and once again bestowed our hearts with hope and confidence. Life is indeed unpredictable. Sometimes, in the depth of bleakness, the moment that touches you forever turns out to be just around the corner!

To me, Chi Heng is like a spring breeze, blowing into the stilled pond at the bottom of my heart, triggering ripples of blessings that keep spreading outward into infinity. From then on, Chi Heng has, to me, become a synonym for salvation and rebirth, because they sow seeds of love with action and sincerity. Now, I know that we are not fighting this battle alone.

When the first ray of sun in the morning strikes my window and forms a beam of light on the floor, warm and fragrant, I know that it is the taste of blessings. It turns out that blessings never left us. They were always there, waiting for us to rediscover and embrace.

Blessings are not beyond reach. If we have heart, we will have dreams, and blessings will be there with us every step of the way.

## Let the Sun Fill Our Hearts and Souls

There will always be sunshine after wind and rain. Although we cannot control the weather, we can choose our mood. Choose one filled with sunshine, and let the sun fill our hearts and souls...

- Qing Feng

I am a student sponsored by the Chi Heng Foundation, and I once lived through difficult times while growing up. Therefore, if I were one of thousands of starfish on a sun-drenched beach that did not get washed back to the sea by the last receding tide, I would hope that another tide would come, allowing the seawater of life to embrace me, because the tidal waves could grant me the force of life. If I were one of countless little fish in the deep blue sea that were trapped in a dark corner, I would hope to see a ray of sun that would comfort my soul. If I were a budding seed planted in the spring, I would hope to break out of the soil and follow the bright sunshine, so that I could grow hardily.

This summer holiday, I participated in Chi Heng's home visits for the first time. Because I had just finished my senior high school academic year, I missed the opening ceremony of the summer activities held earlier, but I still considered myself fortunate to have been able to join in the actual home visits. Prior to this, I had seen other, older university students carry out similar work to help junior school students, such as home visits and tutoring. I greatly admired such work and had long wished to participate in it some day, confident that I too was capable of doing it. Hence, I could not be happier when my opportunity finally came! Over a period of ten days, we did all the home visits in one township. It is now several days after that, and time for some reflection. This was a life-changing experience for me, as there were many moving moments in the course of it, leaving me with a profound impression. I feel that I, too, have benefited immensely.

It was July 19 when I reported to the Chi Heng office. A meeting was held in the morning to allocate our tasks for the upcoming trip. By the afternoon, we were on our way to our destinations, carrying with us all the supplies needed for the home visits. There were altogether nineteen of us, including four in my team. Since we had a lot to cover, our supervisor allowed us to spend longer hours than usual on the road each day. Still, to complete all the visits in time, we had to be as efficient as possible.

The child was not home at the first family we visited. They lived in a two-storey house, with an apparently decent quality of life. Even though there was no fine decor or fancy appliances like an air-conditioner, they did have some basic furniture and appliances like a TV, fan, and coffee table. The child's father was an AIDS patient. He used to drive a taxi in town, but as his health started to decline, he gradually found driving too exhausting, so he sold his taxi and used the money to build his house. We asked him if he was under treatment and if he was persistent in taking his medication. His attitude was surprisingly positive, saying to us, "I regularly take my medication for treatment. Even though I can't handle relatively heavy manual labor, my lifestyle is still quite good. This disease is not really terrifying like cancer, which one can die from very quickly. I have had it for several

years now and I am still okay. I just take whatever medication I need to take, and I remain quite well. It is not a big deal." Upon hearing that, we felt happy for him and our mood was lifted. His positive attitude in facing life's challenges is to be admired. When we learned that he was idle at home without any work, we decided to give him the task of doing an enterprise survey, which was of interest to him. We noticed that he was smoking throughout the conversation, so one of us said to him, "Sir, smoking is bad for your health. I am speaking to you as if I were your son. Please quit smoking. Quitting is beneficial to you and will help you get better. What do you say?" He said that his long established smoking habit would be hard to shake immediately, but he would try to gradually wean himself off it, as he was also aware that smoking was detrimental to one's health. This family was quite enthusiastic to see us, and offered us different soft drinks. However, we were there to do a home visit, not to accept anything from them, so we just used "hard to bring with us" as an excuse to politely decline the offer.

On the final day, we spent as much as half a day at the last home we visited, and it was already dusk by the time we finished. Thinking back, out of the whole trip, our visit to Kou Village made the deepest impression on me. It was overcast with a gloomy sky that day. When we arrived at the first home there, we saw that the house consisted of two rooms built with clay, which were connected to an adjacent kitchen built with brick. There was a bed in the courtyard, and a light drizzle was just starting outside. We noticed that the only valuable item in the house was a TV. Otherwise, there was just an old table and another bed. The family was obviously very poor. Both parents were AIDS patients and were receiving treatment. In addition, the mother had a sore back and found it hard to do manual labor. The older daughter was planning to go to Shanghai for training to become a baker, while the two younger sons were still attending school. For the sake of their family and especially their children, the parents were trying their best to do whatever work they could to earn money. Their goal was to enable their children to keep pursuing their education. Despite obvious difficulties, they deliberately maintained a sunny view on life, so as to instill in their children a positive frame of mind and provide them with a healthy atmosphere in which to grow up.

Thinking back to the last few years, we sponsored students have received not only material support, but more so emotional support, just like what these parents were giving their children. Although we went through tough times, they forged our resolve, and we learned to be strong and to persevere. The care and compassion that ardent supporters have showered us with make us feel beloved as if we were part of their family. As we grow up, we too hope to be able to give love and care to many others who need them, and put the wisdom we have acquired during our upbringing into action to help them. I hope to bring sunshine into dampened spirits, soothe damaged souls, and fill empty hearts with warmth and affection, so that every one of us could have a bright tomorrow.

Our frame of mind determines our attitude, which determines our spirit, which in turn affects our mood, and our mood can seriously influence how we deal with each situation. A passive attitude could negatively affect a person, an inferiority complex could lead to extreme disappointments with life, and a sense of loss could make a person even more passive still. As this goes on, despair will set in, there will be no more sunshine in life, and only doom and gloom will lie ahead instead. Such an outlook can have detrimental consequences. On the other hand, one can be like that father, who confronts life with a positive attitude, believing that tomorrow will be better, and that each day will bring new rewards. Even though sickness is cruel, we live in such a big world filled with so many

kindhearted people that I believe love and compassion still exist on earth. If you can put a bit more sunshine in your heart, brighten up, and face life with a positive attitude, you too can be in a good mood and can enjoy the good things in life everyday. Then, when you stand in front of nature, you will see its limitless vitality; when you stand in front of a stream, you will hear the clear trickling of its water; and when you stand in front of the sun, you will bathe in its golden rays. Upon opening your eyes each morning, exclaim, "Life is wonderful!" Remember to always live each day and each moment with a positive attitude!

## **Adversity, The Driving Force behind Striving**

I went through a similar experience to that of Xiao Xiang and can't help but salute his fortitude. Without a doubt, adversity became the driving force behind his striving.

- Fei Er

Adversity is normally not an asset, but to those who have lived through adversity and emerged from it, it can be a valuable asset. During this year's home visits, a student attending third year senior high school left me with a profound impression - I was deeply touched by his fighting spirits and the persistence in his striving for a better tomorrow.

His name is Xiao Xiang, and he is from an ordinary rural family. He may be ordinary, but he is not mediocre. The adversity he lived through has forged his resilient character. His optimism in continually striving for a bright future for himself impresses everyone around him and makes him a role model at school.

There were originally four people in his family -- his father, his mother, his older brother, and him. They lived a simple and modest life, and they were happy, but a great misfortune befell them in the year 2000, when Xiao Xiang was only 8 - his father suddenly died of AIDS. It happened only a few months after the initial diagnosis, and the family was completely caught off guard. Then, in September that same year, his mother was also diagnosed with AIDS. These two misfortunes, both unimaginable to Xiao Xiang and his mother, were a double blow to the family, and they were at a loss as to how to deal with them amidst their grief. However, reality is reality, and no one can change it. Thus, the three remaining members of the family were left to fend for themselves, relying on each other in their struggle for survival, all the while plagued by illness, financial hardship, and prejudice. It was in such agonizingly adverse circumstances that Xiao Xiang grew up.

Fatherless at such a young age, Xiao Xiang felt deprived of a kind of parental love and affection, but he was fortunate to have the greatest mother on earth. Despite her being just an ordinary woman, she tried her very best to provide unconditional love to her children. In turn, when the heavy responsibilities of life fell on Xiao Xiang's young shoulders, he did not flinch but instead chose to be strong in accepting them, so that he could help relieve the stress on his mother. Perhaps because of this unusual situation, Xiao Xiang seemed to be more mature than other children his age.

The perseverance in pursuing one's dream is the most beautiful thing in life. As time passes, Xiao Xiang has made it into senior high school, but, these days, he still works as hard at school as he always has, and he never gives up. Our fate is in our hands. In the long journey of life, who can say that we will always have a smooth ride? Who can be sure that there will not be obstacles and difficulties ahead? Often, when we see success, we perhaps fail to also see the struggles that lead up to it, or the many challenges along the way. If we abandon our quest just because of one setback, we will eventually regret it and will have nobody to blame but ourselves, and if we lose the courage to move forward because of our fear of failure, we will never be able to fulfill our dreams. Xiao Xiang has faith in that there will

always be sunshine after wind and rain, just like what the lyrics of a certain popular song say. He strongly believes that adversity is the driving force behind the persistence in his striving.

During the home visit, his mother could not hold back her tears when she said to me, "My son is very thoughtful and understanding. He knows that we are going through tough times, and in order to relieve me of my worries, he would rather let life be hard on him than be hard on the rest of us. At the same time, he insists on pursuing his education." Indeed, this child has a different childhood and adolescence from others'. As a result, he is particularly serious, diligent, and organized in everything he does. His hard work is apparent to his schoolmates, his teachers, and his mother, and he finally earned his reward - he scored an outstanding mark of 586 on his high school graduation exam this year, enabling him to be admitted to the Tianjin Foreign Studies University. As his mother was telling me this, she displayed a splendid smile on her face mixed with tears of joy. In that instant, I could sense that she was happier than her son was, because, after all these years of providing for her son, she had finally reaped her reward. She must have felt very proud that her son was set for a promising future.

"Every time I come home, I see that my mother's hair has turned greyer. The pain I feel in my heart is indescribable, but I choose to not say anything about it. I choose to remain strong, and to take up more of the family responsibilities. Only this way can I enable my mother and those who have helped me live a happier life." As he was saying this, tears of resilience sparkled in his eyes. The heavy family burden has not discouraged him, and the difficulties in life have not caused him to give in. The hard times have made him strong and resilient. In the face of hardship, he is an indomitable warrior.

A harsh life and a distressing family situation have not broken Xiao Xiang, because he fully understands that adversity in life is actually the most valuable asset one can ever have. Although it has given Xiao Xiang a bitter experience, he keeps striving to forge a better tomorrow! Believe in yourself! Go, Xiao Xiang, go!



## **The Lonely Bud**

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. Chi Heng has taught me the honest truth about growing up, and I hope that this spirit can be passed on down the generations.

- Ah Kai

Time flies when you are enjoying what you do. Soon, my Chi Heng summer work will be coming to an end. I have had such a good time with the students in the hobby classes that, thinking of our imminent farewell, I cannot help but feel a bit reluctant and sentimental, and doubly cherish our remaining time together.

Sunlight possesses such warmth, why can't it reach every corner? As I sat at my desk by the window late at night, I again sunk into deep thoughts...

This is a true and touching story that I personally came across. The protagonist is a bright and intelligent girl. She looks adorable with her round face and sparkling eyes, but you can see a touch of melancholy hiding behind those eyes. Juan Juan, 11, is currently in 5th grade in her village's junior school. Normally, children this age should live under their parents' loving care, but she enjoys no such rights. Having lost her two dearest loved ones one after another - a most painful experience - she seems to have matured a lot overnight.

Juan Juan's father suddenly fell ill when she was 5 and died because they did not have the money to obtain proper care and treatment for him. With their financial pillar gone, a shadow of gloom descended on this impoverished family. Her mother could only do some odd jobs here and there to provide for the family, but their misfortune and suffering did not end there. Fatigue from persistent overwork and the pain of losing her beloved husband caused her to succumb to a sudden outbreak of illnesses. More than six months of treatment in The People's Hospital could not reverse her deterioration, and she too eventually passed away when Juan Juan was only 7.

From then on, Juan Juan was alone, left to live with her elderly grandparents. This painful episode fundamentally changed the inner world of a beautiful and lively girl. She no longer harbored the desires or the excitement of other children her age. She became quiet and reserved, avoiding and disliking interaction with others, and she appeared depressed, withdrawn, and unsociable. It was agonizing for her grandparents to watch this development, so they decided to send her to the Red Ribbon Homestead, hoping that the better living conditions there and the chance to socialize with the many fellow students would bring about a positive change in her. Unfortunately, it did not turn out that way. In the first few days, perhaps because the new environment was refreshing to Juan Juan, she did not seem to have difficulty fitting in, but by the end of two weeks, little Juan Juan was crying and yelling, wanting to be out of there. No matter what anyone said to her, she just would not stop crying. Her grandparents could not bear to watch this and took her home.

Since then, she has continued to live with her grandparents and has been attending the junior school in the village.

As Juan Juan gradually gets older, she has become more mature and more considerate than her peers. Everyday after school, she helps out her grandmother with cooking and chores around the house. In order not to disappoint her grandparents, she always earns top marks at school. Not only that, she is also always happy to help others, and is acclaimed by her peers and praised by her teachers for doing so. When I asked her what dreams she had, she replied that she hoped to grow up quickly so that her grandparents could enjoy life themselves. Hearing such a mature answer from a little girl, I felt a sudden sting in my heart as if it were pricked by a needle, but at the same time, I was delighted that such a young soul could be so worldly in her thinking. I wish from the bottom of my heart that little Juan Juan will realize her dream soon.

I also hope that Juan Juan can, through the summer hobby classes this year, open her mind, dissipate her melancholy, and face the future with a positive attitude. Little Juan Juan, this older brother wants to tell you that there may be many more difficulties in the days ahead, but there is also much of the past that we need to forget in this world. No matter how agonizing it gets, remember to face life with a smile, and don't stop believing that there will always be a rainbow after wind and rain. I wish that each day would be a happy day for the bright and adorable Juan Juan.

Spending time with the students in hobby classes also touched me on a deeper level, providing me with an unforgettable memory in my life. These children enabled me to relax from the tense atmosphere of university. They also rekindled a lot of long lost childhood sentiments in me. Seeing their passion for life and their resilience in the face of adversity has purified my long dormant heart from its insensitivity. In them, I saw the future, and I saw hope. Even though they sometimes gave me headaches when their selfishness or ambitions took over, overall, they impressed me immensely. I believe that, as they grow up, they will only become finer still.

There is a saying, "adversity is the best university in life". The students who live in adversity are stronger, more self-reliant, more perceptive, and more lovable as a result. Here, I sincerely wish them a vigorous development, and happiness each and every day!

#### Author's note

Under the nurture of Chi Heng, I have gradually grown from a little starfish into a big starfish. I continuously evolve and grow with the encouragement and support of the big Chi Heng family. Today, I am about to say goodbye to life in the ivory tower and step into the real world. No matter what happens tomorrow, I will always conduct myself and do my work with surefootedness and sincerity as well as a grateful heart. Finally, I want to thank every member of this big family for your love, care and assistance during this process. I wish everyone a bright future, and an even better tomorrow for Chi Heng!

## **The Little Lady Who Liked to Blink**

The subject: Jia Jia, 6-1/2, from an AIDS-impacted family.

This is a record of the joyous life of a happy girl.

I wish her a happy childhood, and hope that she will have a bright future.

Best wishes to you, Jia Jia.

- Xiao Xing

She liked to forcefully blink with her lovely mesmerizing eyes. To be honest, I particularly enjoyed observing her, catching a glimpse of her smile or seeing her mischievous looks. Each day, I would pay particular attention to her several times, because I found it gratifying whether watching her from a distance, making a face to earn a smile from her, or chatting with her. During the split second when she blinked her eyes, I would imagine a lot of things. Did she think that, each time she opened her eyes, this world would have become better and would give people more to anticipate and fantasize about? Did she think that those around her would become more pleasant and friendly? Or did she think that her mother would buy her some delicious food and fresh new toys? I did not know what really went on in her mind, but I did know that, after each blink, her eyes would become more gleaming, more expressive, and more trusting of this world and the people in it.

### She hid under the table during my lecture in class

I remember that it was a language class for junior students, and I was reciting many new words and phrases with them. Most of the kids were well behaved. They paid attention to my teaching and read out loud with me, except her. She would sometimes open her mouth and sometimes keep it shut, and then, before I knew it, she would hide under her table. Oh my! That was hilarious and frustrating at the same time! I went in front of her, stood there, and stared at her, but that got her going even more, and she started playing hide-and-seek with me! I stooped down to tell her to come out, but she immediately withdrew her head to avoid me. As soon as I stood up, she got underneath her table again. I really did not know what to do with her, so I had no choice but to return to the teaching podium. And then, puzzlingly, after a while, I found her properly seated at her chair again. I could only sigh that I really did not understand her world.

Later on, we got to know each other better, and perhaps she started viewing me as a friend. I asked her why she did not listen carefully to me in class. She replied, "I was listening intently, hadn't you noticed?" I said, "Why, then, did you keep hiding under the table?" She said, "I purposely got underneath the table to hear you talk, because I could hear you very clearly from there, but I could not when I was above." Her answer rendered me speechless. Talking with her made me chuckle all the time, a genuine laugh from the bottom of my

heart. With her, everything in life was full of justification. It made me feel that she was immensely privileged in life.

Contrary to her behavior in language class, she was completely serious when she studied classical poems with me. For someone her age, it was a bit difficult to learn ancient literature, as there were words that she did not understand. When she encountered such words, she would seem tied up in knots - frowning, eyes wide open, lips pouted, and, of course, she would blink her eyes. Hence, after class, I would give her some extra tutoring, teaching her new words and new phrases, and after that, she was able to memorize and recite the poems just like her older classmates could. However, there was one thing she absolutely refused to do - write words in front of the class. Each time I called on her to do that, she would furiously shake her head, refusing to come up to the front, and just sat there with her pouted lips. Okay, I gave up.

### We played games together

Because of this activity, childhood games that evoke fond memories deep inside me re-entered my life, games like pick up sticks, jump hoops, and chess. She particularly enjoyed playing pick up sticks with me. Initially, she always won, sometimes to the extent whereby I did not even get to accumulate a single stick. It was so embarrassing! Gradually, I rediscovered how to master the technique, and it became hard for her to win anymore. However, this little lady who liked to blink her eyes was unwilling to lose. Seeing that I had won more sticks than she had, she showed great displeasure on her face, as if she was about to spoil the game. Sometimes, she was even bold enough to outright ask me to give her some of the sticks I had won, seemingly on the verge of crying if I did not do so. Seeing that, I figured I had better give her some sticks. This way, she gradually "robbed" me of more and more of the sticks I had won, and then she would display a proud grin.

### She gave me a drawing of 'Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf'

I was very delighted when, not long ago, she gave me this drawing (based on the Chinese animation TV series of the same name). Even though the drawing itself was nothing special, she again forcefully blinked her eyes when she handed it to me, and those innocent eyes and their expressions gave me immense joy. Could she be thinking, "When I open my eyes, my teacher will definitely have accepted my gift and will praise me for how beautiful my drawing is"? She just seemed forever so lovable and innocent. Of course, I ended up satisfying her every wish.

Today's world is very cruel and materialistic. I think that maintaining an innocence in seeking to enjoy life and allowing oneself more room for happiness is better than wrecking one's brains on how to make more money, as some people do even during holidays. Every AIDS-impacted child bears a sad story, one that nobody particularly likes to talk about, but I sincerely hope that these children will never feel that they belong to a lower class than others. Perhaps you have been cast aside, despised, or humiliated, but hang on to the belief that we are all honorable human beings and have our own pride and dignity. Believe in ourselves, and we can happily forge our own future!

#### Author's note

As a local villager, I was born here, I went to school here, and it was here that I first got to know my lifelong friends. There is a special sentiment that attaches me to this land in which I grew up. This place was once full of misery and sorrow, but today, it is full of sunshine and hope. We no longer blame fate for being unfair, but instead, we positively face today's life's challenges and those in the future. We try to live like the girl in the story, believing in the decency of people and the goodness of the world.

## The Girl Who Wielded Wings

When we face life with a grateful heart,  
everything is a gift from God. I feel that the  
greatest achievement this time is that Xiao  
Ping now understands this principle.

- Xiao Zhao

"Fortunate families are all the same, but the unfortunate ones each suffers from its own misfortune." During childhood, the family environment plays a critical role in the upbringing of a child.

Xiao Ping, 12, was an introverted girl. When she was 8, her mother was paralyzed by a stroke. This sudden illness, with its associated medical expenses, plunged the poverty-stricken family into further financial hardship. While other 8-year-olds were enjoying their family pleasures, all Xiao Ping could do was to stare at the gloomy sky, wondering if, one day, the sun would cast away the dark clouds, so that she could once again enjoy some family warmth. Alas, it was not to be! As if this misfortune was not bad enough, what followed was even more devastating. Xiao Ping's mother, who among all the people in the world loved her the most, eventually succumbed to her illness and passed away, leaving Xiao Ping behind. During the three years of her mother's illness, Xiao Ping could not and dared not feel any happiness. Every time she attempted to think of the word "happiness", something else called "anxiety" would remind her to wonder if her mother would ever get better. Worse still, her father's and her grandmother's persistent sighs struck fear into her innocent eyes about what might come next. In the depth of the night, when she overheard her mother's tormented moans and groans, all Xiao Ping could do was to wipe away her own tears. Such a feeling of helplessness and the fear of what awaited them in the future injected further insecurity into her young soul. Oh, how much she wanted to hold her mother tight, never to let her go! Powerless, she could only watch her beloved mother get weaker by the day. No matter how desperately she cried, "Don't leave me! Don't leave me! Don't leave me!" her mother still ended up departing this world. All that was left was a memory, like what is described in the children's song *On Earth, Only Mommy is Great*. Unfortunately, for Xiao Ping, her mother's struggles and moans during her illness were probably part of this memory as well.

There is a saying that misfortunes come in pairs. Next, Xiao Ping's grandmother, already in her sixties, was diagnosed with AIDS. Since Xiao Ping was an only child, and her father was away from home working all year long, she and her grandmother had grown used to living together and caring for each other in all the years since her mother passed away, and they had become very close. But now, even the only remaining person she could rely on in life was found to have an incurable disease. Already rather devoid of family pleasures, this further blow to Xiao Ping really made her wonder each day what fate had in store for her. Perhaps, not far in the future, her father might bring home a new wife? How should Xiao Ping address her? How would they get along with each other? Young Xiao Ping was like a lone swallow caught in the middle of a hurricane, not knowing what would happen the next moment. As a result, she seemed more mature and understanding of things than others her age, so much so that it was distressing for me to watch.

Growing up under such circumstances made it difficult for Xiao Ping to fit in with the rest. The other kids in her class were all lively and active, but she alone was frighteningly quiet and withdrawn. When I attempted to talk with her in private, her large beautiful eyes, full of sparkle, displayed an immense loveliness, but she herself was like a scared rabbit, and that touched my every nerve. In class, when the other kids were getting rowdy, she would just sprawl on her desk, clutching her own shoulders, looking lonesome and helpless. That was painful enough to watch, but what pained me even more was that I had never seen her smile. That pair of frightened, spiritless, big eyes always stared at me with a hollow look, and that stabbed my heart. I found her despondence worrisome, as if the innocence and vivacity of children had nothing to do with her. She was confining herself to a dark world, keeping everything covered up and refusing to interact with anyone. Time and again, I pondered how I could be of help to her. I made two attempts, both times to no avail, as she was just too quiet and withdrawn. However, like the movie "Not A Single One Left Behind", I was not going to give up on any one child.

I then worked on livening up the atmosphere in class. By encouraging every student to be participatory, I hoped that she would respond to the team spirit and feel valued and appreciated by others. After one week of this in-class program, the result was overwhelming. I recall that, one day, the lesson was about love and compassion. I told the class what a monotonous and dismal world the deaf-mute kids lived in, as they could only use sign language to communicate with others, and that, by contrast, we were far more fortunate, since we could hear the sounds of chirping birds and insects everyday. As I became more impassioned in my lecturing, I noticed that there were tears in the eyes of a few kids, but what was truly astonishing and unforgettable was the change in Xiao Ping after that class. To my utter surprise, she proactively waved goodbye to me! Xiao Ping had transformed from her withdrawn self, unwilling to interact with others, and unwilling to accept her teacher's love and care, to now waving to me and saying, "Goodbye, teacher," and her former spiritless and melancholy-filled face was displaying a mesmerizing smile. What a remarkable improvement that was! Suddenly, every single pore in me was gushing with happiness and elation, as if waves of warm current were flowing into my heart, and the gesture she made as she said goodbye was forever seared in my memory. Xiao Ping's transformation deeply touched me. It gave me a thrill and happiness beyond description, making me feel like I was the luckiest person on earth.

It was on that same day that Xiao Ping started to actively respond to questions and uninhibitedly play with her fellow students. Though still a bit shy, her hearty laughs told me she could now experience joy like others her age could. Let us hope that her smiles will forever be like the brilliance of the sun, and come wind or rain, she can still boldly march forward to welcome every single day, just like the rose that can grow more hardily and bloom beautifully in the storm.

Perhaps because we belong to the same vulnerable group, my expectations for Xiao Ping are particularly high. I, too, was once an introverted and unsociable girl who grew up in a single-parent family. With low self-esteem, I stubbornly believed that I was far inferior to others. However, when I grew up, I suddenly realized that every experience in life was a treasure. It is only because God loves us so much that he has given us a pair of imperfect wings, to provide us with an experience different from the average person's. We should consider ourselves lucky to have been able to give God such a challenge in his planning. We



are already not the worst off. Don't forget that, when we complain of not having shoes to wear, there are those who don't even have feet to wear them!

My experience during those days has left me with a profound feeling: we should actively live in the here and now, treasure the blessings we already have, cherish the people around us, and welcome life each new day with a grateful heart.

The girl who wielded wings, best of luck to you!

## A Story From My Summer Holidays

I thought that the story of a person's abandoning his or her spouse because the latter is sick could only be found in a movie like *Love for Life*. Little did I know that I would actually come across such a situation in real life.

- Xiao Gao

Her name is Jia Jia, and she is 13 this year. She is in Grade 5 at school and has a younger sister at home. In the eyes of fellow villagers, someone like her, at this age, should be a happy little girl, but Jia Jia has in fact experienced mental suffering that no one can imagine. A few years ago, while she was playing outside with her sister, her father left home and never returned.

Let us first go back to the year 2004. That year, AIDS testing came to the village. Test results revealed that both Jia Jia's younger sister and their mother, Ah Chun, were infected. Thus began the whole tragedy. When Jia Jia's father, Ah Dong, found out that both his wife and their little daughter had AIDS, he abandoned the family and left, no longer wanting to be bothered with looking after his daughters or his ailing wife. All this happened too suddenly for Jia Jia's mother to cope, and she thought of committing suicide. Fortunately, her neighbor found out in time and talked her out of it.

In Ah Chun's own words, "Their father was truly unconscionable to have done this. Even if he didn't care about me, those two daughters were his own flesh and blood! How could he just suddenly dump me and marry someone else in the next village? And he had not even divorced me before remarrying! At that time, I really wanted to expose his facade in front of his new bride, but after some thoughts, I came to the conclusion that, since we were once a couple after all, doing that would be too much. My thoughts then turned to my children. With this illness, how could I continue to feed and care for them, especially the one who is also infected? This is why I just wanted to die, but even that attempt was thwarted when my neighbor saved me. After a while, I gradually came to my senses - my dying was no big deal, but who would take care of my two children? So, I decided that, no matter how tough it would be, I had to live a few more years, until my daughters became fully grown. Only then could I contentedly leave this world."

The hope inside her gave her a purpose in life, and Ah Chun set out to find work. Even though she could not do manual labor, she could at least manage some easier jobs. By this time, the government was starting to provide free AIDS treatment, and Ah Chun would diligently take her daily medicine, because only this way could she prolong her life and see her children grow up. To date, this mother with an incurable disease has been persistent in taking her AIDS drugs for seven years, day after day without interruption, such is her determination to live.

Jia Jia's family lived in a small gatehouse built in the 1970s, with numerous cracks on the walls. Inside, there was only a dirt floor, which would turn muddy and slippery when it

rained. The kitchen was as small as they come, with many broken roof tiles in the ceiling. Because of that, when I walked in, I could see the sky from the inside. To be honest, I was worried about my own safety, as I feared that the building could collapse at any moment. Outside the kitchen were three rooms with tiled roofs. Their age was apparent, as most of the bricks on the walls were already rotting away. There was a table and a few chairs in the living room, and a closet and a bed in the back room. There was also a TV, purchased when Ah Dong was still around. Nothing had been refurbished or replaced for seven years, and everything was deteriorating with age.

Life might be harsh, but this family remained undaunted. Materialistically, they could not compare to others, but they were contented with life. When Ah Chun had some leisure time, she would go to her parents' home to help trim the vines. The two children were very obedient, and the little one was particularly lovable. The second time I saw her, she was wearing a straw hat chasing sparrows away in the vineyard, and she looked so cute. Seeing that she was such a lovely and spirited girl, I particularly found her circumstances heartbreaking. Jia Jia was doing well at school, and as she grew older, her mother was beginning to feel a lightening of her burden. The mother's illness was starting to manifest itself, however. Her facial complexion had changed, and she was losing more and more weight. When I visited their home, the saying Ah Chun uttered the most was, "Jia Jia, grow up quickly."

As I was leaving their home, I asked Jia Jia what wishes she had. She smiled and told me that, because she and her sister had always been wearing used, torn dresses, she wished that they could each have a beautiful dress to wear. Amidst her smile, tears were also streaming out of her eyes. I could not look back as I left, and on the way home, I felt very depressed. I had wanted to do everything I could to help them, and yet, I could not even help her with this small wish. When I got home and told my mother this story, even she could not hold back her tears.

## The Quality of Life and The Life Expectancy

Sometimes, the heavens seem to pull a little  
prank on you. It disrupts your life and throws  
it into turmoil, but life still has to go on, right?

- Ah Shan

It was during last summer that Xiao Wei learned the terrible news. He had been persistently sick since that spring, feeling fatigued all the time, and his flu symptoms just would not go away. Prior to that, he was able to run in one breath from his home to the side of the main road, but by this time, he had to rest once or twice along the way. However, at the young age of 12, he never thought much of these symptoms, especially since he had not been in very good health since birth and had got used to it. Back when he was 2, he had a fever that was not treated early on, and it developed into meningitis. However, fate was not going to let go of him just for that. During a blood transfusion, he unfortunately contracted HIV.

On a particularly hot summer day last year, Xiao Wei was staying at home because of his flu and fever. He was resting in bed after an intravenous drip, when his mother sat down to say to him, "Xiao Wei, there is something I have to tell you. I feel that we don't have the right to keep you from knowing about your own health." Xiao Wei noticed the abnormal expression on his mother's face. He lifted his head and saw that his father was squatting by the door, staring at him with a sad look. His heart skipped a beat, wondering what was going to happen. His father approached him and whispered, "Be strong, my son. The doctor said that in a previous blood transfusion, the blood you were given was tainted with HIV, so you have been infected." Although Xiao Wei had expected bad news, the reality turned out to be many times worse. He howled in desperation, "Why tell me? This is too cruel!" He kept screaming and crying, his body seemingly paralyzed but trembling uncontrollably.

He did not know how he would face his teachers and schoolmates - should he keep the truth from them, and just say that he had meningitis and needed to take a break from school? Or should he tell them about the actual situation? If he were to do the latter, what would the consequences be? Maybe he would lose all his friends, maybe no one would want to talk to him anymore, and maybe everyone would keep a distance from him. No, he could not tell the truth.

Xiao Wei stayed home by himself, not wanting to be bothered with anybody. "Xiao Wei, you already have a sickness to deal with, and you are also trying to do everything you can think of to conceal it from others. This is too much of a burden," his mother said to him one day after dinner. "Let us give it a try! Only if you take this first step can you possibly live like a normal person again." He glanced at his mother, and nodded.

He spent a whole day writing this letter, addressed to all the students at his school: "...I would like to return to school. I wish to have your understanding that we are still friends, and I hope you will treat me like any ordinary person among you."

On the third day after the letter was handed in, Xiao Wei got ready to go to school. His parents stood at the front door of the house to see him off. "Our boy, we are proud of you. Sickness will not defeat you." Xiao Wei went to school full of apprehension, not knowing what would await him. "Will my schoolmates say hi to me? What if no one wants to sit next to me? Will my teachers still mark my homework?"

We do not know what happened after that.

At 9:37 am on July 26, 2011, the group of us doing home visits arrived at Xiao Wei's home. It was almost ten o'clock. The house still looked the same as it did a long time ago, consisting of four rooms built with mud. There was scarcely any furniture inside, and it was damp, because it had just finished raining. After chatting with Xiao Wei's mother, we learned that because they were economically strapped, with three children going to school, Xiao Wei's father was working away from home in order to be able to earn more. As to Xiao Wei, he had made it to junior high school with Chi Heng's financial assistance, and his dream was to get into university. He wanted to use the most spirited way to bid farewell to sickness and to his troubles, and the most traditional way to honor his parents and repay them for their love.

He case taught us a principle: If you treat the final stage of life as simply a part of life and accept it, you can learn to live again, grow again, and be creative again.

Go, Xiao Wei, go!

## **Love Depends on You and Me - My Concerns about Children with AIDS**

Every child deserves to be loved, especially the children living with AIDS. We should provide them with even more love and care. I believe that, if we all work together, we can enable them to find the best future for themselves. Love depends on you and me. Let us make an effort together!

- Xiao Fang

AIDS - a word that we cannot afford to ignore. I forgot when this western-sounding word first entered our lexicon, but it has awakened us from our deep slumber and made us learn about it, understand it, and fear it. For people who are not close to those affected by AIDS, who could possibly know that there is such a group of people suffering from unspeakable agony and misery?

In the afternoon of July 25, 2011, we visited the home of Xiao Liu in a village in Henan. His mother and his third sister were combing a sheep at the door. When Xiao Liu's mother saw us, she quickly got up to invite us inside. On the surface, she appeared warm and cheerful, always smiling, but who could know what kind of pain and bitterness was hiding behind her smiles?

Xiao Liu is 11 this year and is attending Grade 4 at the local junior school. He has been HIV-positive since birth, through mother-to-child transmission. However, the word AIDS was only added to Xiao Liu's household vocabulary on August 22, 2004, because it was on this day that, following a village-wide general blood test, his mother was informed that she and Xiao Liu were found to be HIV-positive. What was it that led to their being infected with this unusual disease? Was it drug use? Not possible. How could such poor people afford buying drugs? Was it buying or selling of sex? No way. They are just simple, down-to-earth, hardworking people. So what could it be? She quickly searched her memory, and the words "selling blood" popped up prominently. She thought of her late husband. "At that time, in order to have this house built, he kept going out to sell blood. Who could have known that building a house would cost you your life?" Pointing to the house we were sitting in, tears rolled down her cheeks as she told us her story. Xiao Liu's father had come down with a "strange illness" in 2001. Despite seeking medical help everywhere, none of the treatments was effective and he still passed away. At that time, Xiao Liu was just over a year old. His eldest sister had already ceased going to school in order to save money for his father's medical treatment. Then, her second sister, who had just started in Grade 5 junior school, also had to quit school to help out at home. His third and fourth sisters are twins and were both aged 4 at the time. As the family could no longer afford to feed and care for them, Xiao Liu's mother decided to give them away. However, prolonged malnourishment had resulted in third sister Duan Duan's being a weakling, and nobody wanted to adopt her, so Xiao Liu's mother had no choice but to keep her. She was the girl we saw combing the sheep as we entered the house just now. "The other one looks just like her, and she has probably grown to the same height by now," Xiao Liu's mother said. "In order to look after her younger brother, Duan Duan did not go on to junior high school for a few years, because she knew

that her brother would be bullied at school and the teachers would not bother to intervene. She also knew that her brother would not tell the family about the bullying. Since she had witnessed it all and could feel his pain, she wanted to stay in the junior school to protect him. But now, she is finally going to junior high, and can't be with her brother in the same school anymore. She is always very worried that he will be bullied."

Xiao Liu has always had health challenges. He has problems with his digestive system and often suffers from diarrhea. In addition, he perspires easily and frequently runs a fever. In January this year, Xiao Liu again had an opportunistic infection, with a fever running as high as 40 degrees Celsius. Because the fever did not subside for a long time, he spent more than three months in the Zhengzhou Hospital, followed by more than a month at the township hospital, each day getting an intravenous drip. Nowadays, he is receiving antiretroviral treatment, and has to take antiretroviral drugs at set times each day. When this treatment first started, the side effects of nausea and vomiting were hard to bear, but no matter how difficult it was, he still swallowed the medicine. If he vomited it out, he would take it again. I asked him, "Is this medicine bitter?" He said, "At the beginning it was, but after I got used to it, it was no longer bitter." By now, taking this drug everyday has become a routine for him. Perhaps such physical discomfort is insignificant compared to the mental stress he has to endure. At school, his schoolmates boss him around, or bully him by snatching his belongings. He comes home from school crying everyday, but he dares not tell his mother in order not to make her worry or feel sad. Such a young soul has to endure pain and suffering that should never belong to him, and so much of it too! It got so bad that, at one time when he was very ill, he even thought of committing suicide. He is in fact very bright and possesses a thirst for knowledge. Even though he basically did not go to school during the last term, he still received a very good grade of over 80 in his final exam. As his mother rarely lets him go outside to play, he likes to stay home to read. Sometimes, he will watch a bit of TV, or play chess with his third sister. When asked what his aspirations were, his answer surprised us all. He did not say that he wanted to become a teacher, doctor, or engineer, nor did he have any other noble aspirations. He simply said, "I don't have any lofty goals. I just want to be an average person, not too wealthy and not too poor. That would be good enough for me." Perhaps, merely being able to grow up is a high enough aspiration for him. Looking at the cute photo of Xiao Liu taken when he was 100 days old, his mother mumbled to herself, "I don't even know how old this child can grow to..."

It was already dusk by the time we left. White smoke was rising from the chimneys of the houses in the village, and the occasional dog bark particularly highlighted the tranquility of the place, as if nothing had ever happened here. On the road back, I kept thinking to myself how cowardly I was compared to them. In the face of misfortune, they are much more resilient than I could ever be. They have not blamed society for unfair treatment, nor have they contemplated any revenge. They merely try their best to improve their own lives. For example, just the day before our home visit, they were applying fertilizer to their fields. They knew that their fate was in their own hands, and everything depended on their own efforts.

From the home visits this summer, I have also come to more deeply appreciate how lonely and helpless victims sometimes are in the face of AIDS. They need society's understanding, love, and compassion. Perhaps AIDS itself is not that frightening. Instead, the prejudice that exists in society and the feeling of being abandoned by friends and relatives are the truly frightening aspects of it. There is a particularly tender spot in my heart for AIDS-impacted orphans. I am concerned about their physical health, their education, and, above all, their

mental health. I fear that a discriminatory environment will hurt their spirits and cause them to seek revenge when they grow up, perhaps even revenge against society. It takes a joint effort from everyone to solve this problem. I hope that I, too, can help AIDS-impacted people in the future, like what Chi Heng Foundation is doing now. Maybe I alone cannot make enough of a difference, but I believe that, if each of us makes a bit of effort, we can bring about change in the world. It could be a long road to travel from fear and discrimination to rational understanding, love, and compassion, but I believe that, wherever there is love, there is hope, and as long as there is hope, we must not give up. Let us come together to create a paradise of love for them.



## Because Love is in Our Hearts

The summer work has been over for a while, and I very much look forward to my next community involvement. It was marvelous to have been a teacher for the children. Thank you, Chi Heng!

- Xiao Bei

"Each of us has a dream, although our dreams are all different. Whether my dream comes true or not, I would be thrilled if I could just share it with you. We may be ordinary but we are not mediocre, because love is in our hearts. The world is like a maze, yet we get to meet at this point in time - this is our home."

At the Chi Heng gathering, all of us sang the song *Because Love is in Our Hearts*. That rendition, so filled with love, was very moving, so much so that I kept bathing in its warmth and affection all summer. That effect, coupled with my appreciation for what Chi Heng had done for me, compelled me to give my best efforts to Chi Heng's summer practical experience program, particularly since this was the first time I got to participate in it.

Right after the opening meeting, my teammates and I immediately began the home visit phase of the work. During these home visits, I was once again extremely touched by what I encountered. The sight of all the dilapidated houses, rotten furniture, and sad faces really stabbed my heart like they were daggers. Years ago, I had watched on TV about how ancient emperors could not have known the sufferings of his people until he actually went to see how they lived. Now, I fully understand how I, too, could not have known the difficulties of families living in extreme poverty until I actually saw them in their homes.

There is a saying, "Fortunate families are all the same; the unfortunate ones each suffers from a different misfortune." That is very true. Even though I came across many unfortunate families during the home visits this summer, some families' misfortunes were truly heartrending. The one that made the deepest impression on me involved an 8-year old girl named Xiao Qian. January 15 is the traditional day for family reunions, yet it was exactly on that day that Xiao Qian lost her mother. She had two other siblings - an older brother and an older sister. Her father, already extremely poor, had to take care of all three of them now. Worse still, because Xiao Qian's uncle and aunt had to go away to find work, they also left their four young children in the care of Xiao Qian's father, adding to his already heavy burden. However, what I found commendable was Xiao Qian's positive attitude, which was apparent during conversations with her. Even when we asked about her family's situation, she still answered every one of our questions with a sweet smile on her face. Compared to this greatness in her character, I truly felt how little I was. I was therefore interested in chatting a bit more with her. In that process, I learned that she loved to read extracurricular books, but her father could not afford to buy her any. Hearing that really touched my nerve - little did I know that the biggest wish of this small soul could so easily be met! Hence, the next day, I quickly went and bought her a comic book. This episode reminded me of the Story of the Starfish our mentor, Mr. Chung To, told me. To me, this may be just one starfish

among many, but to the starfish, what I did for her was her everything. I hope that I can similarly help more little starfish in the future.

Xiao Qian's situation also reminded me of my own early childhood. Back then, I always thought that I was the most pitiful, as my family had always been extremely poor, and my mother had to sell blood in order to make ends meet. My father wanted to sell blood too, but he was refused by the blood collection agency because he had Type B Hepatitis. By the time my mother was diagnosed with AIDS, I was only 13 or 14 and had just gone on to junior high, while my younger brother and sister were still small. My grandmother was suffering from a serious case of herniated disc, and her treatment had long ago exhausted our family savings. Thus, my mother's sudden illness caused everything in the family to come to a standstill. With no other options, my parents had to go far away to find work with better pay in order to support the continued schooling of the three of us and pay for the continued medical treatment for my grandmother. I thus became the backbone of the family at home, in charge of caring for my elderly grandparents as well as my younger siblings. That was my life day after day, year after year, through hot summers and frigid winters. At times, I felt that the enormity of the tasks was beyond me, so much so that I could not even distinguish between my sweat and my tears. Yet, no matter what, I kept telling myself that a way forward would eventually present itself, and that I should never give up. Maybe the heavens could no longer bear watching me suffer, maybe my prayers were answered, or maybe I, out of all people, most deserved to be helped, but when I entered the second year of senior high, just as I was about to turn numb from my misery, the heavens brought Chi Heng to us. Only then, with Chi Heng's help, did I dare to start dreaming of going to university, a dream that was eventually fulfilled. Chi Heng has given me the chance to reach my goal, the courage to morph from a caterpillar into a butterfly, and the ability to shoulder the heavy responsibilities of my family. I have been reborn because of Chi Heng.

Back to the present, during the summer work with Chi Heng, I had the opportunity to once again step into the classroom where I studied as a student more than a decade ago, only that, this time, my role had changed into that of a teacher. In this classroom, we taught the children not only about culture and knowledge, but we also paid particular attention to instilling in them a grateful heart, confidence, and resilience, so that they could pursue their own dreams, as Chi Heng is more than willing to act as their wings for them to take flight.

During the summer classes, an AIDS-afflicted child named Xiao Fu caught my attention. Being in grade one, he would normally be too young to qualify for participation in the summer classes, but at school, he was a particularly good student, very attentive in class, diligent in taking notes, and observant of teachers' instructions, and, after school, he was always very courteous and respectful in asking teachers questions on things he did not understand. Knowing that, we did not have the heart to turn him away, so we let him join the classes. During a physical education session, as I watched his diminutive figure play on the field, it suddenly struck me that life was so fragile, that such a young life had to endure the torment of this horrible disease, why was it that I could not do anything about it? However, even if I were to blame myself for being unable to help, what good would it do? I guess the only thing I could do was to cherish and give love to this fledgling life while the opportunity was there.

Each Chi Heng sponsored student can proudly claim one thing - that he has two families, one with his parents, and the other with the Chi Heng brothers and sisters. Because love is

in our hearts, this extended Chi Heng family is united in helping each other out, so that we can create a bright future together. We firmly believe that our dreams will surely come true.

### Postscript

The summer work has already come to a conclusion a while ago, but the experience remains unforgettable. Even though it only lasted a month, the various anecdotes at school and among the children are forever etched in my memory. By the same token, I know that the children have also not forgotten us. After the hobby classes wrapped up, children were still coming to my home asking me to play with them. Even nowadays, after I go to school, they still come to my house asking my grandmother when I will be back, or whether I will tutor them again next summer. I am always touched every time I hear that, because it shows that they truly enjoyed the summer hobby classes, and that they also enjoyed spending time with little teachers such as myself who are like their older brothers and sisters. Of course, all this only became possible thanks to Chi Heng, for providing us summer workers and the children with such transformational opportunities.

## **Chi Heng - The Family We Love**

This is a holiday that I will never forget for the rest of my life, as it enabled me to become good friends with the children. Although the holiday is now over, my friendship with them is just beginning. I wish Chi Heng's children all the best in the future. Go, my brothers and sisters, go!

- Ah Le

As long as you have love in your heart, you will always find family wherever you go!

It can be torrid in July and August, much like how children's temperament can sometimes be. The more you feel its heat, the more blistering it seems. Since we are powerless to change it, we had better get used to it. Life is like that too. When we encounter misfortune, what we need to do is not to gripe about it, but face it with courage. Don't you agree?

I have learned, benefited, grown, and matured a lot during a year of university life, particularly in developing the two approaches to dealing with everything in life - be thankful and be positive. I am thankful to my parents for giving me life, thankful to my teachers for giving me knowledge, thankful to my relatives for taking care of me, but most of all, I am thankful to Chi Heng for giving me a new home and family. As to being positive, I was fortunate to have met the compassionate Chi Heng on my road of misfortune, so that misfortune has turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Therefore, no matter what happens in life, never despair but look on the bright side instead. A positive person is like the sun - there is light wherever he goes. A negative person is like the moon - looking different every day of the month. Just laugh things off; nothing is a big deal.

When I first became a member of Chi Heng a few years ago, I had sworn that I would turn from a recipient of help into a provider of help. Today, I have finally fulfilled this wish of mine, being able to give love and hope to a vulnerable community. There I was, returning to the land where I was born and in which I grew up, bringing with me love and affection for the children. When I was with them and saw the happy smiles on their faces, all my troubles and anxieties were promptly forgotten, and I could feel abundant blessings rushing into my heart.

After the hectic opening ceremonies for the summer work, I got to spend time with children whose family backgrounds are similar to my own. Here, I am referring to the fine arts group of the Chi Heng summer classes. Even though working with this group did not involve the extensive travels with home visits, the hard field work with social surveys, or the hectic schedules of the photography group, we still had a job to do, and that was to introduce fine arts to the children. Music, drawing, and dancing are all art forms that could cultivate the children's interests, soothe their emotions, and mold their sentiments. When the children immersed themselves in blissful singing, graceful dancing, or exquisite drawings, they looked so happy that tears of joy came to my eyes!

Different songs let the children express different feelings. I could hear in their singing their passion for their motherland, their keen anticipation for the future, and their deep gratitude to Chi Heng. Different dances let them learn about different cultures and customs. With group dances, the emphasis was on teamwork, while modern dance allowed them to display bold, liberal spirits, and Indian dance showcased that country's local customs. Different kinds of drawings, above all, allowed the children to express their artistic concepts in different ways.

Whether it was singing, dancing, or drawing, the one common element found among all of them was love. The children yearned to be loved, and at the same time, they were more than willing to love others. When I asked them what they wanted most, they all invariably answered, "Love!" I then asked, "Do you know what love is?" They told me that love meant being sympathized with, being cared about, and being liked.

One child said, "Teacher, do you know that I don't like walking into my home? I get a headache as soon as I walk in. It is oppressive there, so much so that I feel like I cannot breathe."

Another child said, "Teacher, do you know that I don't plan to go to school anymore? This is because we have no money for that; we are too poor."

Yet another child said, "Teacher, do you know that others bully me? They say that I am an unwanted child. Am I really?"

Children, I want to tell you this, "No, it is not like what you think. Perhaps what we desire is not what we have today, but all of this is only temporary. As long as we are not afraid of failure, as long as we don't give up and keep trying hard, everything will become better and better."

There is a saying, "Knowledge will change your fate." Today, we need not and should not worry about too many things. We only need to focus on our education. Only if we study hard and get into university can we break out of our confines and chase our dreams. Only then can we bring about a better life for our families.

You said that you were all very poor, but it is exactly because of that that we have to work harder to build our future. We may lack money, but we must not lack resolve or fortitude. Your challenges are not as frightening as you may imagine. What you should fear instead is the lack of courage to face them. In fact, challenges are like a wound spring - it will be strong if you are weak, but it will be weak if you are strong,

Today, we live in a community full of love, with many, many kindhearted people by our side. Chi Heng is our home, one that is cultivated, tolerant, and inclusive. It exists not to spoil us but to encourage us, telling us that if we work hard to chase our dreams, we will have a life full of blessings!

## **Abandoned by Heaven; Loved by Us All**

As a bystander, I was moved by Xiao Li's struggles. As we wish blessings for this child, let us also treasure the little blessings in our own lives.

- Xiao Lee

While other children were enjoying their delicious candies, all he could think of was whether his parents could afford to give him just one more mouthful of food.

While other children were playing with their fancy toys, he could only entertain himself by rolling around in the puddle.

While other children were going to school, he was merely struggling to get by each and every day in abject poverty.

He has never enjoyed any of the innocent, beautiful, and unforgettable times of a typical childhood, such as the love and affection of his parents, the carefree days, or the fun that comes with children's games. He is like a child abandoned by heaven, never having tasted any of its blessings. This is Xiao Li, a boy of 11 from Yunnan. Even though he just finished Grade 3, he once had to be the pillar of support for his family as if he was a little man.

There is a song that goes like this: "The child who has a mother is treated like treasure; the one who does not is treated like a weed." Xiao Li was indeed treated like a weed, as no one cared about him. Several years ago, his mother died of AIDS from drug addiction. After her passing, his father did not only continue with his drug addiction, but also got into gambling, which burdened the impoverished family even further. Eventually, he gambled their house away and was further burdened with gambling debts. He and Xiao Li were relegated to living off the street, constantly chased down and harassed by their creditors. Xiao Li was small at the time, and there really was not much he could do in those circumstances. Whenever the harassers showed up, all Xiao Li could do was to hide in a corner and weep in terror. For anyone who has not experienced this first hand, I guess it is impossible to feel the kind of fear and helplessness that Xiao Li felt. Moreover, his father's health was poor because of his drug habits, and not only could he not take care of Xiao Li, on the contrary, poor Xiao Li had to take care of his father.

However, Xiao Li did not cower under such pressure. Perhaps out of love, he conjured up great courage, leading his father from one hiding place to another to evade the bullies, and found whatever he could think of – be it leftover rice he salvaged from trash cans or fruit and vegetables that had gone sour – to feed his father. Maybe only he himself knows the unspeakable suffering of those times – the many nights they were awakened by the biting cold, the sleepless nights tossing and turning in extreme humidity, or the many dreams broken up by buzzing bugs. Occasionally, people who could not bear watching their misery would give them a little bit of money to help them out. Then, finally, luck came upon them one day.

Some caring local people had formed a volunteer group called “Cozy Homestead”, aiming to assist those living in difficulties. Needless to say, Xiao Li was a perfect fit as a beneficiary, and they helped him turn a new page in life. When they realized that Xiao Li, almost 8 by then, had not had the opportunity to go to school, they started looking around for a school that would take him. Things did not go well at first. Despite their best efforts, many schools refused to admit him when they learned about his family background. Eventually, they found a school with a mission similar to theirs, one that specialized in taking in children from very poor families whose parents had gone away to find work. When the principal of that school heard about the miserable situation of Xiao Li, he accepted him without hesitation and exempted his tuition and boarding fees. One of the teachers at the school was particularly moved by Xiao Li’s circumstances and paid extra attention to him, often giving him food and drinks, and provided him with used books to encourage him to read. Some time later, Chi Heng began subsidizing him, thus brightening up the dark corners of his heart and giving him hope for the future as well as the courage and tenacity to continue his journey in life.

Children from poor families tend to take up family responsibilities early in life, but for Xiao Li, just past the age of 10, the suffering and misery he has lived through are hundreds of times more than those of other young children. As a result, he is more like a mature little adult compared to his peers. Well aware that the opportunity to go to school does not come easy, he studies very hard and has achieved corresponding results – he has always come first in class ever since he started school. Perhaps because he is one year older than the rest (although I would rather think that it is because of the ordeals he has gone through in life), he is proactive in caring about others in class, and tries his utmost in helping them. This earns him trust from his teachers and fellow students, and he ended up being appointed to the important post of class rep. He does not let others down and has done a great deal for the whole class, which is very impressive to know.

Xiao Li’s father passed away when Xiao Li was 9, and, from then on, he truly became an orphan. When the Cozy Homestead people found out that Xiao Li had an aunt, they went to see if she would take Xiao Li in. Xiao Li’s aunt also lived in extreme poverty. Despite her being economically strapped, she was very sympathetic to Xiao Li’s situation and agreed to be responsible for his upbringing. To Xiao Li, a child devoid of motherly love, his aunt is like his own mother, as he feels very blessed to be cared for and loved by a relative. Hence, he is very obedient to his aunt, and often helps out wherever he can. Although only 11, Xiao Li aspires to join the military, to protect those who need protection and help those who require assistance. It is his way to repay the people who have cared for him. That is Xiao Li, someone who was once abandoned by heaven, but because of the love shown by the community, he is now able to go to school, have a home, and live a life full of blessings. He has become a person loved by us all. Although the road ahead is still long, through Xiao Li’s own hard work, it will be an easier journey from here on. Let us wish him all the best in the future!

#### Author’s note

Throughout the home visits during the summer, I personally witnessed many broken families and the plight of many poor children. Their gaunt faces, full of aspirations and hope for the future, are still very vivid in my memory. They all moved me greatly, but the most moving story of all is that of Xiao Li, as his resilience and hard work impressed me

tremendously. My greatest regret is that I did not get to meet him personally, yet I have still chosen to write about him. His story is so touching that I found myself unable to put down my pen. I have been thinking that, had I actually met him, my essay would certainly be different, perhaps even more realistic and personal. Please forgive me for not being able to do that. For now, please wish this child well, and wish everyone else well too. Do treasure our little blessings in life!



## **A Spiritual Journey**

The past is in the past. All I want is the present. All starfish of Chi Heng, work hard! Believe in yourselves! We are all rooting for you!

-- A record of the 2011 Chi Heng summer work and my own reflections.

- Ah Yin

The day after the opening ceremonies, we immediately devoted ourselves to the packed schedule of home visits. Before the work started, I contemplated for a long time how to best go about it, as I could not predict what kind of family or children we might encounter. Disease had not only brought them physical pain and suffering, but more so a dark shadow over their spirits, particularly for the fragile souls of the young children, which I dared not tinker with.

### **The Angel was Smiling**

The first day of home visits went relatively smoothly. I met people tormented by sickness in each of the families we visited, and the scenes weighed heavily on my heart. I also got to meet a lot of children, but one of them left a particular impression on me. Although this young lady's body was ravaged by the merciless illness, leaving her emaciated and fragile, she remained cheerful and positive. Coming face to face with this little angel, I initially did not know how best to start a conversation with her, worried that what I said might inadvertently touch her nerves and hurt her, so I started by asking, "Little sister, what do you like most?" She raised her innocent face and answered with a smile, "I like to sing, to dance, as well as many other things." That moment enabled me to see that she possessed great inner strength as well as optimism. I wish my little angel happiness forever!

My heavy heart felt a little lighter as I left the home of my little angel, because I realized that a child with such a family situation could enjoy happiness as well, just like the rest of us could, and she could also possess a cheerful and confident outlook, which reminded me of the song lyrics that say: "We are all the same!"

### **Our Hope**

It was just past noon, and the scorching sun was swirling above our heads. My teammates and I had arrived at the home of a sponsored student. When we introduced ourselves as volunteers from the Chi Heng Foundation, the student's mother enthusiastically invited us into the house to be away from the heat. That gesture made us feel very welcomed. As we went in, we saw that the child was watching cartoons, so we sat down beside him. His mother happily chatted with us about her son, saying that he was very smart and could imitate the actions in the cartoons just from watching them. He also worked very hard at

school, and during the summer, under her direction, he had already finished learning all the math lessons for the coming school year. Watching the child happily jumping on his bed and calling out for his mom, we too could sense his intelligence and joy. After a good chat with the mother, we left their little house, one filled with peace and hope, while the vivacious, cheerful, and smart face of the child was forever seared in our memory. In him, I saw hope – the hope that lied within a 6-year old, probably the result of both Chi Heng’s support and his own intelligence and hard work. Such a moment made me feel that our summer work was very much worthwhile. Although it may seem insignificant to some, I know that we were symbolizing a beacon of hope, a hope that provides confidence to the sponsored children, and we were also relaying the needs of the children back to the foundation, so that they could do whatever was necessary to ensure that the kids grow up happily and in good health. Children are our future. I believe that, if those who help us can see this cheerfulness in the children, they themselves will also be pleased!

### **The Little Lady Who Wept because of School Challenges**

We came to little Jing Jing’s home in the sweltering afternoon. There were only three people in the family – Jing Jing, her younger brother, and their grandmother. When Jing Jing came out of the house, we saw that she was tall and skinny. Her grandmother, however, was chubby and genial, and she quickly invited us in. Things were messy inside. The three narrow rooms were mostly used to store food. Jing Jing had to go to the hospital for a scheduled health check every week, which intruded into her schoolwork, and it was suffering as a result. She was frustrated about it, and her grandmother was also worried. The grandmother told us that little Jing Jing used to do quite well at school, but because of her health condition, she had fallen behind in some schoolwork, and her grades were slipping too. Little Jing Jing had in fact endured more than that – the torment of her illness, and the hardship of life – but this lovely child had not forgotten her primary goal, which was to do well at school. I had already done many home visits up to that point, but this was the first time I had seen a child weep because she was not able to do well enough at school. Little Jing Jing, you have to be strong and steadfast in your journey. I trust that you can do well at school through your own hard work!

We wanted to take a picture of little Jing Jing, and we found a corner in this narrow house for that. In the picture, the wall behind Jing Jing was filled with awards and certificates. These represented the hope and the challenges this little lady had set for herself. It was her way to counter her twist of fate. “I believe that I am what I am, I believe in tomorrow, and I believe that I can reach the sky.” I, too, believe that the skinny little Jing Jing can go far and achieve much more!

### **The Youthful Mother**

An amusing thing happened during the home visits. One day, we came to the home of a student who had just completed his senior high school final exam. As the door opened, we were stunned to see a very young looking mother. Her appearance was so youthful that she did not look at all like someone who could have a child in his early twenties. As she led us inside, we learned that there were altogether two families living with HIV in this village, hers being one of them. However, this mother had a very positive and optimistic outlook,

and I think that it was such an attitude that kept her looking so youthful. Seeing her, we came to realize how important a positive attitude is to a person.

By contrast, at another home, we came across a father who was the backbone of his entire family. During our conversation with him, we could feel the depression in him. He told us that just thinking of his own serious illness often kept him awake at night, and because there were not that many HIV-positive people in his village, he felt ashamed and did not much want to go out and socialize with his fellow villagers. As it is customary in all the villages for people to gather outdoors and chat with each other after dinner, we felt that he was shutting himself out from the rest of his community. Therefore, we tried to talk him into having a more positive attitude, telling him stories of cancer patients who were still able to live happily because of their positive mindsets. After our conversation, this father seemed to understand better what we were trying to tell him. I hope that he will improve his attitude and get well soon!

### **What Touched My Heart**

Another week filled with home visits has just come to an end. Throughout the hot summer, we visited more than 200 families of sponsored students, so many that even I and my teammates admired each other for our tenacity. We believe that our hard work was meaningful and worthwhile, as all of us were touched in our hearts in one way or another. This summer will be one that we will treasure forever in our lives.

During the home visits, we came across many single-parent families. Some of the children were resilient; others were taciturn. Sometimes, I could not even bear to ask the lovable children when their parents passed away, in case I touched their nerves. I did not want to hurt them and only wanted them to be able to live in peace, but I did wish to establish some emotional connection with them, because if I could help them dispel the dark shadows in their minds, then it would be the greatest and most meaningful thing that could ever happen to them. There is much yet that we as a community can do - we need to provide them with love and care, not just materialistically, but for their spirits as well.

As to the fathers and mothers we met during the home visits, whose bodies were being consumed by illness, every one of them loved their children dearly. Seeing their thin and weak physique, their grey and sparse hair, and their bony faces wrecked by illness and the ravage of time, I could not help but feel pain in my heart. Dear dads and moms, I really want to say to you, "I love you all." Can you hear me?

I also learned that many parents worked at the local brick factory loading and unloading bricks. I have experienced that environment first hand. As the red-hot bricks come off the kiln, workers have to scramble to haul them to the big trucks. If they don't fight to get their share of the brick load, they will not be able to earn those few pitiful cents per brick for their hard labor in hauling them. The blistering sun and the heat waves emanating from the factory are suffocating, yet every day or night that they can toil away is a day's wage earned. I do not know what I can say or do to change this harsh reality for them and to lessen their hardship. I can only think of the Chi Heng Foundation and its social enterprises, hoping that Chi Heng's social enterprise programs will gradually solve these problems. Put wisdom into action. That is something that the Chi Heng Foundation is able to do.

Finally, I wish to say thanks to Chi Heng on behalf of all the children, and also to our mentor, Mr. Chung To. It is Chi Heng who has given us another life. It is Mentor To who has propped up a world full of love!

## The Same Doorway, One Year Later

Essay by Xiao Rong

“Last year, you welcomed me with smiles at this doorway.

On the same day this year, who would meet me at the same doorway?”

- Yih Xiao Min

As I walked through your doorway, the scene from a year ago again flashed vividly across my mind. Back then, you were sitting on the bed by the door, and, seeing us come for our home visit, you hurriedly get up to welcome us with a big smile. I remembered that we talked about many, many things, and before I left, I took a lot of pictures of you and your children.

This year, I stepped through your doorway again. The bed by the door was still there, but the person sitting on it last year was no longer around. The children’s mother told me that you passed away in September last year. It never occurred to me back then that it would be the last time I would see you.

You were already sick when we came for our home visit last year. From your dark facial complexion, we could sense that you might also be suffering from some other disorder. Indeed, we subsequently learned that you were suffering from a hardening of your liver, and the disease was already at a late stage. Yet, when we saw you, you were still active and mobile. How come you left us so soon afterwards?

Perhaps your early passing was related to your abject poverty. Those who had been to your home would understand the meaning of the phrase “a house with four blank walls”. The broken closet had no door on it, and hung inside were just a few pieces of old, torn clothes. Miscellaneous items were piled up on the bed you used to sleep in, and an old TV subsidized by the government was putting out some feeble noise. The wall of the house was already cracked, typical of a structurally unsound building, and everywhere indoor, we saw small electrical wires crisscrossing each other in a disorderly fashion, making me feel nervous even just sitting there. When I got up to look around, I noticed that there was no food to be found anywhere, just like it was the year before. And then, in one room, I saw some cooked soybeans on the floor and a rice cooker in one corner, next to which was a bowl holding some leftover soybeans. Then I realized what the soybeans were for – that was the only food available in your household!

When I saw half a bag of flour on the table, I asked, “Did you guys make this yourself?” Xiao Xiu’s mother said, “No. This was rationed by the government.” Then she added, “The wheat we harvested had all been sold, as we were urgently in need of money to pay for Xiao Xiu’s father’s treatment. Now, all our meals come from the government support program. Once in a while, the neighbors may give us a few buns, sometimes some vegetables that they have grown, and I cook them for the children. The four of them are in their growth phase, and they need a lot of nutrition. We don’t have any money to buy vegetables, so whenever I get

some, I'll save them all for the children. As to the soybeans I cook, I just add some oil and salt to them and they will be edible."

When she got to this part of her story, she started to wipe away tears from her eyes. She told me that, when Xiao Xiu's father was still around, he would go out to work to earn money, and she would stay home to mind the kids. Back then, at least they had enough to eat and enough to wear. Now that he was no longer around, she still had to stay home to take care of the children and therefore could not do any work, so the family no longer had a source of income. Then she told me that, last year, she did try working a job picking tealeaves. She would leave the three older children at home, bring the youngest one with her, and let him play next to her while she picked tealeaves. Then she realized that it was too tough for the young one to be exposed to the scorching sun all day long, so she left him at her aunt's house instead, but, much to her dismay, he ran away on the first day. Several people went around looking for him all through the night to no avail, and that worried her sick. The next day, she went to the police station to report him missing and found him there. After that, she no longer dared to go out to work. She would rather stay home, be poorer, than have any accident happen to her children.

I could perfectly understand her feelings, as that was the quintessential mentality of a mother. Children are every mother's most beloved. In her eyes, they are all unique jewels. It did give me great comfort that, with today's high rate of school dropout, none of her four children had quit school. What a wise and great mother she was!

As I listened to her story about her husband, herself, and their children, I felt like listening to music created with the most powerful love on earth. I thought to myself, "What a great family! What a wonderful story of motherly love!" Even though she was merely telling me plain anecdotes in life, without the use of any colorful language, I could still fully feel the greatness within her ordinariness, and the strength and resilience within her vulnerability. She was not reciting any official pronouncement or legal papers, but there was wisdom in her every word. What was it that allowed her fragile shoulders to carry the heavy burden of this family? Was it the responsibility a wife owed to a deceased husband, or was it what her children expected of her?

I knew that I did not have the wherewithal to help her, nor was there anything I could do at that moment to ease their hardship. All I could do was to carefully listen to her story, and then, through my pen, make more people aware of it.

The same doorway, one year later, but no longer the same people.  
Whoever has passed away will not come back, but those living still have to live on.  
Face the future without fear; the family needs you as its backbone.  
With Chi Heng's support, the children's continued education will not be a problem.

I wish to let her know that she is not carrying her family burden alone, that there is a large group of people here supporting her as well. Even though there is a limit to the material support Chi Heng can provide, we will stand with her in spirit all the way in facing her challenges and overcoming her difficulties. No one in this big Chi Heng family is fighting the battle alone, because we all truly love and care about each other.

Xiao Rong  
Aug. 9, 2011

#### Author's note

Every person is predestined to be unequal from birth. The only things in life we cannot choose are our parents. What we need to do is to be grateful for what we have, and try our very best to improve our own circumstances. Even though we may not achieve what is the most ideal, we should still give it our best try. At the minimum, we should be able to do better than we did in the past.

## Remember This

Misery is not scary, because we have the gift of love as company. Along this journey, we have come to understand a lot and learned a lot. Let us use love and our pursuits to inspire time, inspire the heavens, inspire the rocks, and inspire everyone around us - you, them, and me.

- Xiao Jie

Everyone wants to have a complete family, but what is a family? It is a place where your parents meticulously care for you before they think of themselves, where there is always someone to tend to you when you are sick, where you will be reminded to have a hot breakfast before leaving home in the morning, where everybody will cram into a motorcar to go shopping, where you can hear the joyful sound of cooking when you come home, where the whole family can happily dine together or jump around on the bed playing, and where the sweet fragrance of flowers in the garden is carried by a gentle breeze to your bedside every morning. Unfortunately, this is not what home is for Xiao Li, a junior school student and a child of an AIDS family.

Xiao Li's present home is not her original home. Her father was cremated on Dec. 21, 2006, and her mother also passed away soon thereafter. Thus, Xiao Li became an orphan. There were few relatives in her family, and her aunt and uncle did not want to take responsibility of her, so her grandparents took her into their family and added her name to their household registration, so that she could continue to qualify to attend public school. But where and how were they going to live? Her aunt and uncle did not want the old folks to live with them, nor did they want to be responsible for their living expenses. The elderly couple had no choice but to build themselves a small house on a piece of vacant land that no one else wanted just outside the village, with its front door opening right on to the cemetery. It is hard to imagine how anyone could live like that, but that is indeed how they live. Life is certainly difficult - Xiao Li's grandparents are not in good health and cannot work, so all they get to live on is her orphan subsidy.

According to Xiao Li, only when you have to carry your own luggage upon getting off the train will you realize how strong and powerful your father's arms used to be; only when you look in vain for an old book will you realize how meticulous your mother used to be in organizing your stuff; only when you feel the chill of the season will you realize how warm your home is with its glowing lights, although, these days, the lights are sadly no longer waiting for her parents to come home. Xiao Li saw on TV the large crowds at the train station fighting their way to hurry home, and when tickets for seats were sold out, they would settle for standing room only tickets. All they wanted was to be able to step on to home soil, see their family at the earliest possible opportunity, and spend New Year with them. This desire to go home is one that is simple and powerful, but, to her, all she could do is to reminisce in tears about the childhood she spent with her parents.



Xiao Li was not home when I visited, but from the various certificates and awards displayed around the house, I could see that Xiao Li took her studies very seriously and worked hard at school. Her grandparents are probably like reborn parents to her, giving her all the love they could give. Even so, I am sure that, sometimes, when Xiao Li sees other kids being picked up by their parents after school, or hears them sing the song *On Earth, Only Mommy is Great*, all she could do is to hide her envy and tears and try not to show her emotions. Similarly, if she comes across this famous phrase from a well-known poem - "who says that the child's humble heart can ever repay her mother's immense love?" - she probably cannot avoid conjuring up her parents' gentle faces. Since the beginning of time, there have been countless devoted and loving parents in this world. They have given us life, yet what a painful thought it is if we do not even have the chance to practice filial piety to them!

Xiao Li, I want to hold your hand and tell you that this world is still full of laughter, tenderness, and happiness. Perhaps you are only a young bud, but as long as there is hope within you, you will grow into a strong, hardy tree that reaches the sky. Perhaps you are a small stream, but as long as you are courageous enough to keep marching on, one day you will reach the ocean. Or, perhaps you are only a baby eagle, but as long as you aim far and high, you will eventually soar into the big blue sky.

Life can never be absolutely perfect, but it can become relatively better. When you grumble that life is not smooth enough, you should think about how you could change it with your own efforts instead of whine and gripe about it, because doing that would only waste your energy. When you encounter darkness, do not feel depressed, because when God closes a door on you, a window elsewhere will always open for you. Fate is ultimately in our own hands. Believe in yourself and always try your best!

## **You Are Not Alone When You Walk with Chi Heng**

You are not alone when you walk with Chi Heng. A tiny drop of love will certainly be repaid with a torrent of love, thus unceasingly passing on this Chi Heng gift of love from one person to the next.

- Xiao Yang

You have nothing to fear, Xiao Yang and Xiao Hai, a pair of lovable twin brothers. No matter what happens, I want you to know that you are not alone, because we at Chi Heng will always walk with you.

Xiao Yang and Xiao Hai are entitled to having a warm and happy family and enjoying the parental love of their father and mother, much like what other children their age get to enjoy. However, to the two of them, something that should normally be taken for granted is outright wishful thinking. Since they were small, the two of them have had to rely on each other to get by in life. There were times when they did not even get enough to eat.

As I entered their home, the first sight that met my eyes was that of three empty rooms built with clay. There was no wall around their courtyard, and no furniture in the living room. The only furniture they had was a broken table and a plywood bed with nothing on it. The brothers were watching TV when we walked in. Otherwise, the house was eerily quiet, and only a "meow" from the cat behind the door broke the silence. When we told them what we were there for, the two boys smiled and happily extended us their hospitality. After chatting with them, we felt rather relieved because it appeared that the upheaval in their family had not left too many scars on their delicate souls. We were quite astounded that, at this young age, they had to shoulder such a burden. Yet, they appeared much stronger than I had imagined, and I was much impressed by their resilience. At the same time, I was also impressed by the tremendous support Chi Heng was providing to them.

From our conversation with them, I learned that after their father was diagnosed with HIV, he had had to depend on medication to stay alive. However, at that time, the medication did not come free, and even after exhausting almost all of the family's savings, he still had not shown any improvement. He seemed to have lost the will to live, becoming very disillusioned and negative, and he developed a bad temper, throwing tantrums at his wife and children all the time. The twins' mother could not take it anymore and ran away from home. To the already impoverished family, that was an added blow. Without her, there was no one to take care of the twins and mind their schooling anymore. Sometimes, they even had to rely on the generosity of their neighbors to get by.

Just when they had lost all hope in life, Chi Heng appeared in their lives and extended a much-needed helping hand. It was as if a ray of sun had shone on them, giving them wings to fulfill their dreams. Nowadays, the two brothers are living a life full of hope and aspirations, and I could also see in their eyes the thankfulness in their hearts.

Today, the older brother has already gained admission to the university of his choice. Despite his difficult circumstances, he never complains about life's injustices and never surrenders to fate. Instead, he studies hard and works his way up one step at a time - first he gained admission into the county high school, then a pretty good university. He is always looking forward to the future. After finishing his high school graduation exam and filling out his university application, he found work for himself in order to make some money for his university living expenses. According to his neighbor, the older brother never buys any new clothes for school. All he wears are clothes donated by neighbors and by other generous people.

Seeing such a family, I really wanted to give them some words of comfort, but any lavish language would have absolutely no effect on someone already so strong, so resilient, and so positive. From the twins, I have really come to understand that famous quote from *Old Man and the Sea*, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." I believe that, with Chi Heng's commitment and the two brothers' inner strength, life will only get better for them.

As a summer work volunteer for Chi Heng, I am very grateful to Uncle Chung To for giving me this opportunity, allowing me to repay my debts to him and, at the same time, turn myself from a person who receives help to one who helps others, thus enabling this gift of love from Chi Heng to be unceasingly passed on.

The ocean tide comes and goes. There are countless starfish left by the seashore. Chi Heng uses its own action to save one starfish after another, allowing them to return to the motherly embrace of the ocean. I thank Chi Heng for its hard work, and I thank everyone involved there for your generous support. I am glad to have been able to offer Chi Heng all that I am capable of, and I wish Chi Heng the very best in the days and years to come.

## **Move Forward with Courage**

"The pounding rain may be noisy, and it may cause the petals to quiver and fall, but all vegetation is rejuvenated as a result. For the sake of the flowers, I am happy that the rain makes the forest greener, but the flowers themselves also need the rain for their own nourishment."

- Xiao Lei

As we travel on life's journey, we sometimes encounter things that we could not do anything to change, making us feel helpless, costing us sleep. Or, perhaps something unavoidable occurred in the past that was regrettable. No matter what, any regret, ignorance, or pain in the past is behind us. What we need to do now is to courageously face tomorrow.

Perhaps our experience in the past makes us feel bitter, perhaps life in the past was harsh, or perhaps our parents harbored certain regrets, but because we have Chi Heng Foundation today, we have Mentor To's help and the support of many others, any unhappiness is part of history. As long as we move forward with courage and confidence, tomorrow will certainly be better for us all.

## **Fatherly Love**

There is a rear silhouette that is firmly lodged in all our minds, and it is that of our father. It makes us feel safe and full of blessings, and it gives us comfort. Childhood times were always happy times, because we grew up under the shelter of our father's love. The mischievousness of our youth might have seemed like naughtiness to some people, but in our father's eyes, it was most lovable, and his genial smiles provided us with a sense of contentment. Whatever challenges we faced back then, as soon as we thought of our father - this grand silhouette - all our problems were solved and our difficulties disappeared. This was why, no matter what trouble we encountered in our youth, or when we were bullied, we always said to the other person, "I'll go tell my dad." A simple sentence like that was sufficient in giving us all the confidence we needed.

By now, decades of vicissitudes later, time has left its mark on father's face, and hard work has left calluses on his hands, yet he remains a strong shield for us, always giving us courage and support whenever we need them. Although he does not talk much, he always manages to provide the reassurance, encouragement, love, and care with just a few simple words. Perhaps, at his age, he is no longer able to give as much as he used to, and so it is time for us to give back to him. We can never repay all the love he has showered on us, but even if we just show him a little bit of care and concern, it will be more than enough to make him very happy. It is difficult to use words to fully express familial love, and even the most magnificent words are insufficient to articulate how grateful I feel at the moment. Hence, let me just use a simple phrase to represent my feelings, "Dad, it has been hard on you."

## Motherly Love

There is an even more important person in our lives, and that is our mother. Speaking about mother, the first thing that comes to mind is her nagging every time we are about to leave the house, particularly if we are going on a trip. We often say, "When a child travels a thousand miles, the one who worries about him is the mother." That is precisely our mother's voice from her heart, because we - her sons and daughters - are always her most precious and beloved. However, when we were young and rebellious, we often did not understand her and instead felt that she was an annoyance, but now that we have grown up and are often away from home studying or working, we hear less and less of her nagging, and are beginning to prize it and cherish it. However, no matter how far we are away from home, our mother always misses us and thinks about us. Even if we come across any harm or hardship while out there, it will all disappear as soon as we come home to our mother's embrace.

There is so much about mother and her kindness that I can never finish writing about it all. I guess everyone knows how to sing the song *On Earth, Only Mommy is Great*. Its popularity is a testament to the importance of our mother in everybody's mind. However, in our mother's mind, it is always her children who are the most important, the most terrific, and the best.

Being able to enjoy the love of our parents made us feel very happy and very fortunate, but amidst all these blessings, something troubling quietly descended upon us, and that was the invasion of our parents' bodies by this terrible disease. Since they got sick, our lives have been turned upside down, and nothing is the same anymore. At the beginning, we did not fully comprehend our parents' anxiety, arising out of their worries about what might happen to us after they were gone. Still, we would feel sad, and we would cry. However, just as our family's turmoil worsened, when we felt the most lonesome and helpless, a bigger family full of warmth descended upon us - the many generous people of the Chi Heng Foundation. With the support of Mentor To, the children of our village are now able to realize their dream of going to university. He did not merely help us advance to university and pay our tuition, he also provided us with employment opportunities, thus enabling us to become self-reliant and to pursue our own happiness in life.

This year is the first time I got to understand the detailed workings of the Chi Heng Foundation, the first time I met Mentor To, and the first time I had the chance to travel to Beijing. Too many firsts, all given to me by Chi Heng and by Mentor To, making me feel very fortunate. I participated in the summer work, got to make many new friends, and was able to live, learn and work together with other students who came from family backgrounds similar to mine. When we did home visits, we also visited children with such family backgrounds. We found out about how they lived and how they studied, so as to gauge the amount of educational assistance they needed and how we could better help them. During these home visits, we encountered many touching cases, including the tremendous love shown by parents to their children, and the children's understanding and appreciation of their parents' situation. We also met some ailing parents who possessed a negative and pessimistic outlook in life, making us realize that the anxiety brought about by the disease impacts different families in different ways. However, despite our feeling touched, reality is still reality. We might feel emotionally affected, but we still had to finish our assigned tasks,

so as to enable those who needed help to receive it. Through the summer home visits, I got to learn a lot and experience a lot, and at the same time, the opportunity enabled me to greatly improve my communication skills.

Happiness may be short-lived, but so are difficulties. Chi Heng is like a pair of wings, allowing us angels with broken wings to grow up happily and soar higher and farther.

## **A Lovely and Irreproachable Girl**

Because of Meng Meng's conscientiousness,  
her life had become so commendable and  
irreproachable that it attracted my  
admiration. Little did I know that, at the same  
time, she also admired my life. As they say,  
"We all seem well blessed in the eyes of  
others!"

- Peng Peng

Meng Meng, 11, an average village girl, is about to advance to Grade 6. She is from a family of four - she, her father, her mother, and her older sister who is now in junior high school. They are very poor, and three of them are HIV-infected, her sister being the only healthy one. Her father is away from home working, and her mother stays behind to take care of the children. Their house is mostly made of clay, with the kitchen and entrance gate being of mud construction.

Meng Meng was washing her hair when we arrived for the home visit. She quickly dried it and sat down to talk to us. Her eyes were spiritless, so much so that, had I not seen her in person, I could not have imagined the desolation shown in them. She was a bit introverted and did not like to talk much initially, but after we told her the purpose of our visit, she started to open up. We learned from her that her father was persistent in taking his medication while working away from home, and that he only came home during the busy harvest or planting seasons. Her mother mostly stayed home to take care of her and her sister, but would also go to work in the nearby electronics factory when she had some spare time, earning a bit over RMB 20 a day. When she did that, Meng Meng would stay home to prepare the meals.

Perhaps due to the terrible family circumstances, Meng Meng seemed more mature than other kids her age, even more mature than her older sister, and was very thoughtful. You could imagine how she felt watching her parents toil away to earn money despite their illness and hardship. Life was already a bit easier for her mother, as she was home most of the time, but who would know what kind of harsh life her father had living away from home? Out of this concern, Meng Meng tried to stay in touch with her father as much as possible. Moreover, during summer holidays, instead of spending time playing with other kids, she would accompany her mother to go to work in the electronics factory. Her sister, on the other hand, was quite the opposite. She seemed not to care much about anything and went out to play a lot, as if family matters were not her concern. Why was that? Could it be that Meng Meng's illness caused her to mentally grow up more quickly? In a normal family, her sister's behavior would not be unusual, but in this particular family, her lack of caring gave us an added appreciation of Meng Meng's attitude.

Let me now describe Meng Meng's house, to give you an idea of how someone could even grow up in such an environment. When we went inside, what we saw was appalling. The three "rooms" were not separated by any walls, but, instead, just by two large pieces of canvas as makeshift partitions. Their furniture was very old, and there was not even the

simplest decor around the house, except for a piece of paper with fans painted on it. According to Meng Meng, they got that painting only because the village distributed it to all the households. Their impoverished condition was really unimaginable, as all the other families I had come across in home visits were better off than theirs. Even the most basic daily necessities were hard to come by for Meng Meng, let alone things like snacks and candies, which to her were luxuries beyond reach. Essentially, she never got to enjoy the things that children normally take for granted. This kind of life was truly beyond my imagination. It made me wonder if Meng Meng's premature appreciation of her family's circumstances was a good thing or not.

There was more that we found startling. Despite its being bare and basic, there was a homey comfort that we felt in Meng Meng's house - the courtyard was not big but was aptly laid out, and everything in the house was neatly arranged, without any junk piled up anywhere. Here, I could feel the true meaning of how a house is a home - a family full of love, without any discord or alienation. This, in fact, is the kind of life I wish to pursue, which explains why I always feel some reluctance whenever I am about to leave their home. Compared to my own family and others I have visited, theirs was so warm! Every corner was meticulously cleaned and tidied up by Meng Meng and her mother. I wished I could stay there forever.

Next, let me describe Meng Meng's life. Because her father is rarely home, and her mother is out a lot, housework is mostly Meng Meng's responsibility. After school and during holidays are times when Meng Meng busies herself with helping her mom cook and wash the clothes. Their family is happy to be together, and her parents are happy that Meng Meng possesses such conscientiousness, which often puts a smile on their faces. When we were chatting away, as long as we did not mention HIV, Meng Meng always talked with a grin on her face, and when I suggested taking a few pictures of them, Meng Meng's poses really touched me - she invariably always put her arm around her sister's, and rested her head on her sister's shoulder. You could see that she just needed someone to lean on, to love and to care for her! Could you imagine, for such a small child, how much she had already had to shoulder, and how much more could she shoulder still?

Meng Meng's life is quite full. Even though she still cried when we talked about HIV, more of what I saw in her was her optimism and her positive attitude towards life. Though a bit introverted, that did not affect her resilience. She was at her loveliest when she talked about her dream, which was to become a nurse, so that she could help the injured and the sick as well as other people in need. Her life might be unexciting but she felt well blessed. I was then determined that I would make every effort to help this girl, someone who may be average but certainly not mediocre.

I hope that, years from now, Meng Meng will remain the way she is today - optimistic and positive, adorable, thoughtful, and living life to the fullest. Let us pray for her - Meng Meng, a lovely and irreproachable girl!



## All Because of Love

If you merely look at their picture, many may exclaim, "What a happy family!" However, they are actually living through misery. We should wish more blessings for this family.

- Xiao Li

I remember that it was a sunny morning. As I lingered in bed, sunlight came through the window and landed on my face. Though warm, it was a bit glaring.

The home visits in the previous few days had made me feel sad. Other than listening to their telling me about their family histories that no one else would fully understand, there was nothing else I could do. They had shed too many tears. All the suffering and bitterness in life had tormented them horrendously. I dared not think ahead to what kind of family history book I would be reading from this day. Could they stay strong and soldier on? All I could do was to listen with heaven's gift of love and provide them with a limited amount of comfort. That was all!

In my hand is a photo that shows a family with three kids that I visited the other day. Looking at their sunny, smiling faces and indomitable resilience, full of hope for the future, who would realize that buried within their aspiring eyes were both a sense of blessings as well as a sense of having been wronged? Who would have guessed that these kids are actually in a "combined family"? Some of them originally lived in different locations and are not blood related, but were brought together to form an affectionate family as a result of HIV infection. They now live together under one roof, in a dilapidated house that is nevertheless filled with love.

Xiao Yin and his younger sister, along with their mother Xiao Ju, originally lived in a mountainous region. Xiao Ju's husband had already died of AIDS, leaving them and an elderly senior behind. Her older brother gave her the cold shoulder because of her illness and would not take them in. For the sake of her children, she persevered in staying at home with her family despite the harsh words of people around her. One day, she learned that Xiao Xue, a child similar in age to her daughter, was also infected, but there was no one to care for him or administer his medication. This sparked an outpouring of motherly love in Xiao Ju, and she assumed the care for this additional child as well despite the difficult life she already had.

Xiao Xue is a 6-year old boy. His mother passed away several years ago, and he and his father are both infected. Due to the financial needs of the family, his father often worked away from home, leaving Xiao Xue and his senile and somewhat demented grandmother at home. His grandmother was often forgetful, and was not able to ensure that Xiao Xue take his medication regularly. Sometimes, after administering a dose, she would forget and give him another dose. Seeing that Xiao Xue was not receiving the proper care he needed, Xiao Ju moved her family to his home and assumed the responsibilities of Xiao Xue's mother as well. Hence, she and Xiao Xue's father became a couple and the parents of all the children, and a new family, full of warmth and affection, was born.

Today, this family of seven lives together in an old and dilapidated mud house with a low ceiling. Four out of the seven are infected - the two working-age adults, Xiao Xue, and Xiao Yin's little sister. Their family composition seems a bit odd - Xiao Xue's father is not a local and was "married into" his original family, and he is completely unrelated to the senior in Xiao Ju's family. They all live in extreme poverty, possessing only an octagonal table, a TV, and an old sofa in their living room. However, despite all that, they still smile splendidly, because it was love that brought all of them together. Nowadays, life is hard for them. The only asset they have is that dilapidated mud house. While Xiao Ju stays home to take care of the two sick children, Xiao Xue's father goes out to work in odd jobs to help put food on the table. As they do not have any livestock, and neither of the parents has applied for the government's subsistence allowance, they have no other source of income besides also working their fields. Yet, despite their abject poverty, this family is happy and positive about their future.

The three children all have rather strong-willed personalities. At a time when they do not yet know much about the world and are still full of dreams for the future, they have had to bear so much agony! They used to have big smiles on their faces, much like the splendid rays of the sun, but the heavens played a trick on them, a cruel trick. Fortunately, the heavens did not abandon them altogether - they came across Chi Heng and Mentor To, who provided them with the help they needed. They are of course very grateful to Chi Heng.

These people have come together because of love. They help and care for each other, and together create a better tomorrow for the whole family. Should we not also give them as much love as we can? In fact, there are many other children like them, and many more who are not yet covered by Chi Heng's sponsorship. They are silently bearing the pain and suffering that illness has brought to them and their families. I hope that everyone in the world will be more concerned about this problem and provide assistance to more children, to let them experience the warmth and love of our big family. I also hope that the government will pay more attention to this issue, so as to give these children a better life, and let them know that, no matter what, they are not alone.

## When Angels Fall to Earth

Every child is an angel. When an angel falls to earth, it is the sky's loss and the clouds' regret, but it becomes the responsibility of mother earth, the hopes of a new shoot, and a beautiful vision.

- Qiong Qiong

White clouds spread across the blue sky. In their midst, there is a multicolored cloud displaying its iridescence under the sun. Though small, it is eye catching because of its brilliant colors. Dragonflies are dipping into the crystal clear water of the creek, butterflies are dancing around the flowers on the lawn, birds are building their nests among rows of fruit trees, and white feathers are flying around all over the sky. This is a beautiful picture painted by Yue Yue while tears were welling in her eyes. I asked out of curiosity, "Why are there white feathers everywhere?" Yue Yue replied, "Those are the wings of angels who have fallen to earth."

On the second day of home visits, I came across a girl whose name is Yue Yue. She and I are from the same village, but I had never heard of her before, and I felt too embarrassed to have to ask my way to her home. Just when I was pondering which way to go at the major crossroad of the village, the old man sitting by the roadside told me, "Just walk to the front part of the village and look for the most broken entrance door. That's where Yue Yue lives." Hearing that, I could hardly imagine the emotions that would accompany me as I walked towards her house. When I got there, what I saw was a tightly closed door, a dilapidated roof, low and broken walls, and a very scratched up door lock. If not for the enticing fruits in the courtyard, I really could not see any sign of life in this grey, mud structure. After knocking for a while, it was apparent that nobody was home, so I begrudgingly moved on to the next stop of my home visits.

As luck would have it, there were people home the second time I came to her house. With a door like that, it seemed like there was no point in knocking, so I just nudged it open to let myself in. As I pushed open the door, I could clearly feel it shaking and creaking, as if it was about to fall off its hinges.

This time, I finally got to meet the subject of my home visit. When Yue Yue heard her name called, she got up and walked towards me. She was wearing a pair of non-descript yellow sandals, a short-sleeve pink shirt, and a lighter pink skirt. She had an olive-shaped face, crystal clear eyes, and long flowing hair that naturally swept behind her ears and around her neck. Yue Yue was shy and was instinctively defensive when meeting a stranger. Seeing that, I had to tread carefully when asking her questions, and she was also very guarded in her response. This initially made the atmosphere rather awkward, but gradually, I realized that Yue Yue knew very little about Chi Heng or about our esteemed Uncle To, and this provided me with an opening. As per the special training Chi Heng gave me in Beijing for conducting home visits, I explained in detail to Yue Yue the founding of Chi Heng, its beliefs, its core principles, and its work, as if I was giving her a report. As expected, Yue Yue listened intently, and after she gained a deeper understanding of the foundation, she began to talk

more and proactively asked me questions on matters she was interested in. Soon, we were chatting away as if we were old friends.

Yue Yue then went on to tell me the entire story of her family from the very beginning. It turns out that there were only she and her father left in the family, her mother having died of AIDS two years earlier. From her story, I realized the reason for the tinge of sadness I saw in her eyes. Her parents had divorced each other when she was very young, and her mother had taken Yue Yue with her when she left the house. However, Yue Yue's stepfather detested her mother's illness, and as a result, she and her mother did not have an easy life there. Before long, her mother passed away.

Her father had been living alone since the divorce. Oh, how much did he wish to have someone keep him company all that time! Therefore, when he heard of the passing of his ex-wife, he tracked down Yue Yue and brought her home along with her mother's remains. That happened right at the depth of Yue Yue's sorrow. He was almost 60 then but looked a decade older. Ever since, Yue Yue has been living with her father. Up till her death, her mother probably never even dreamed that the man who had abandoned her more than 10 years earlier would take her remains home and bury them in his own house. I then learned that, although Yue Yue had been back by her father's side for two years, she still did not know her neighbors well, because she had been somewhat reluctant to step out of that small broken door of her house. It was clear that she lacked the courage or willingness to socialize with others in the village.

In the conversation that followed, I clearly felt that Yue Yue was everything to her father and vice versa. The ten years of separation had not drawn them apart. On the contrary, the love between them remained strong, and they both wanted to give their all to treasure each other and care for each other. Yue Yue recalled that, on one occasion, her aging father braved the rain to go pick her up from school and got sick as a result. Since her father was already suffering from AIDS, his health was fragile, and it kept going downhill. One day, he said to her, "If, one day, I am no longer around, leaving you alone on earth, how are you going to manage by yourself?" Because of this one question, Yue Yue cried herself to sleep several nights in a row.

Yue Yue told me that her father was someone with a sad fate but, despite that, he still faced life with a positive attitude. Yue Yue often prayed to the heavens, with tears streaking down her cheeks, "You have given my father way too much in trial and tribulations. Why has the saying 'a good person will be well rewarded' not proven true in his case? Even a bitter melon would have turned into a sweet melon after 60 years!" Yet, the situation at home had not taken a turn for the better, and life continued to be miserable. Her father had been impoverished since childhood, and even the two rooms in the house were built with government assistance. He toiled away till he was past 40 before he managed to get himself a wife and then have a daughter. Little did he expect that he would then contract the disease that everyone so dreaded, which led to his even more miserable life ever since. When he heard that Yue Yue's mother had also suffered from this disease, only he, with the goodness in his heart, was willing to bury her. Now that he had Yue Yue back, at least he had attained some spiritual comfort, but this also brought about responsibility and burden. Although the very considerate Yue Yue chose to attend the least expensive technical senior high school in the city, she still had to face the disconcerting situation whereby her father could not even afford to buy some buns for them to eat when she came home in the summer.

Yue Yue said that she would always stand guard by her father and take care of him for life, and that she would not leave the county town to find work. She naively thought that she would be able to go work at the county hospital after completing the medical technical course. I did not have the heart to shatter her unrealistic dream, but I also felt compelled to let her know the reality. Seeing her perplexed eyes, I knew that she felt that her dream job and future prospects were slipping away, but after I told her about how Chi Heng could assist with job placement and could find her work that was commensurate with her education and skills, I could see that she clearly felt relieved. I knew that Chi Heng had given her hope.

On a subsequent visit, Yue Yue came out to welcome me when she saw me approach. It was evident that she looked forward to my visit. She candidly told me about her likes and hobbies, her dreams, her hopes for the future, her responsibilities, and even her fears. She said that she would never forget the time when she sat by her mother's ice-cold corpse, weeping and feeling completely helpless. It was a trepidation and despair arising out of not knowing where to turn to in life. Nowadays, she feared that if her father was to pass away one day, leaving her alone, she would not even know how to bury him. Of course, along with that was the implication that there would be no one who would take her into his family this time around. As she got to this point, she could not help but started to cry, and I found that I, too, felt a lump in my throat. I am also from a single-parent family, and I similarly lost my mother at a young age, so I could perfectly empathize with her and understand that feeling of helplessness. The difference is that I still have a father who is healthy, and I also have an elder sister who is my confidant. However, seeing Yue Yue's incessant crying, I had to come up with a way to comfort her. An idea suddenly sprung to mind - Yue Yue liked to draw, so I said to her, "Crying won't help. Why don't you express all your grievances, sorrow, hope and vision in a drawing?" That finally stopped her crying.

Very quickly, while her tears were not yet dry, Yue Yue finished drawing a beautiful picture - blue sky, green grass, flowers, butterflies, fruit trees, birds, dragonflies, flowing stream, colorful cloud... and those white feathers dancing all over the sky which are the wings of angels who have fallen to earth. Yue Yue's eyes were fixated on the drawing, as if she had entered into the world of the picture herself. It seemed like those angels' wings had become her own wings, taking her soaring towards the blue sky, towards her dreams, and towards her own destination far, far away.

## Look to the Future and Pursue A Better Tomorrow

We have to remain strong! All little starfish should remember this: the more your dreams are scoffed at, the more they are worth realizing! We have to use action and results to prove ourselves! Repay Chi Heng, and repay all the people who have steadfastly supported us all along!

- Mountaineer (Xiao Shuai)

Our destination for this trip was two kilometers south of the county town. It was just an ordinary village.

On July 15, we arrived at the home of Han Zhen very early. She was in the middle of busily making breakfast, so I volunteered to help out. After that rush, we were finally able to sit down to chat. She told me that, every day, other than having to get up early to make breakfast, she also had to take care of her grandmother who was in her nineties and her mother who suffered from hyperostosis (excessive bone growth), while her father and eldest brother would go out early to water the fields. The wheat harvest had been poor due to the drought this year, and if the corn harvest also turned out to be poor...

Han Zhen told us about her family's situation. Her father was ill and had to frequently go for intravenous drips. Her mother developed hyperostosis due to prolonged overwork and could no longer get out of bed. Earlier on, her mother had sought treatment at the provincial hospital, but they were unwilling to accept an HIV-positive patient and merely did a simple physical check on her. The hospital staff informed their relatives that hyperostosis could only be cured with surgery, but the hospital would not accept her for surgery there. As a result, her mother was resigned to just waiting to die at home. Later on, someone who had connections to the Henan Military Police General Hospital referred her there, but the high hospital and prescription drug fees hung over this already heavily indebted family like a dark cloud. Fortunately, the hospital and people in the community all came together to help them overcome this hurdle.

*A commitment: Han Shuai wants to devote his life towards obtaining treatment for his younger brother's illness.*

Han Miao, 19, is the second oldest child at home. When he was a year and two months old, he started having seizures. In order to find a cure for him, his family went around to all the hospitals that offered treatment for seizures, be it in Zhengzhou (the provincial capital of Henan), Beijing, or elsewhere. When they ran out of funds, they started borrowing from friends and relatives, and when those avenues were exhausted, his mother went to sell blood. They tried everything to save his life, and yet, a cure has so far eluded them. Worse still, ever since Han Miao suffered a seizure on his first day at school, he has not been able to set foot in that classroom again, a classroom that he had craved to enter. Having experienced school for only that one day, these days, Han Miao can only look on while other

children go to school. Although his intellect today is merely that of a 10-year old, his parents have never given up on treatment for him.

Han Shaui is the eldest at home. He has been smart and hardworking since early childhood, often ranking near the top of the class in junior school. Yet, by junior high school, because of the unusual situation at home, he was no longer able to focus on his studies, and his grades became mediocre. By senior high school, he frequently had to excuse himself from school in order to help out at home during the busy planting and harvest seasons. Although this lessened the manual labor burden of his parents, it seriously affected his progress at school. Subsequently, with the help of Uncle To of the Chi Heng Foundation, Han Shaui finally fulfilled his dream of going to university, and that gave the family a glimmer of hope. Yet, right at this time, the thought of going away to find work instead flashed across Han Shaui's mind, and he indeed went away from home one day, only to return a few days later, worried that his father would punish him for leaving. Surprisingly, his father merely said to him, "You may or may not have a future by attending university, but if you don't attend it, then there definitely will not be any future for our whole family. In that case, how can you be entrusted to take care of your younger brother for the rest of his life?" Because of these words, Han Shaui felt compelled to return to university and resume his studies. He never spends money wastefully and in fact has never asked for money from his parents. Instead, he earns the funds for his own living expenses from gathering discarded plastic bottles or scrap metal for resale, washing dishes at the canteen, or doing odd jobs. At school, he is diligent and hardworking, and has proven himself by winning scholarships every year. When summer holiday started this year, he rushed home quickly and, as soon as he put down his luggage, wasted no time in helping his father with his work. He told his family that, any time there was farm work to be done at home, no matter where he might be, he would always come back to help out, so that his father would not be burdened with it. Watching Han Shaui busy at work from a distance, his elderly father felt relieved that his son was so helpful and diligent, but, at the same time, he also lamented that things had come to this.

*A wish: Han Zhen wants to get into medical school, become a community doctor, and help even more people.*

Han Zhen is the youngest at home and her parents' favorite. Like her eldest brother, she has been smart and understanding since early childhood, and has always taken care of the family. Yet, if not for Chi Heng, if not for Uncle To, Han Zhen probably would have quit school after Grade 6 because of the situation at home. At that time, the very considerate Han Zhen time and again quietly sounded out her eldest brother on the possibility of quitting school, but each time, her brother persuaded her to continue on, because only that way could she repay her parents in the future. Gradually, due to her brother's insistence, Han Zhen dropped that thought altogether. Moreover, through coming into contact with the university student volunteers from Chi Heng who had come to visit each summer and hearing their stories about university life, Han Zhen slowly developed a strong desire to go on to university studies. She told me that she would definitely work hard at school, so that she could grow up and take care of other children with family situations like hers. She said that her wish was to be admitted to medical school, become a community doctor, so that she could help even more people in the future.

*A sense of responsibility: the parents' devotion to actively fulfilling their parental responsibilities, their never giving up, and their never abandoning any efforts provide this family with the hope and impetus to move forward.*

When Han Shuai first learned that his parents had contracted HIV, he could not accept this reality and became introverted, not wanting to talk to his schoolmates. However, his parents' resilience turned around his pessimistic attitude. Later on, as they became more and more ill, they still persisted in going out to work behind their children's back. By the time her mother developed hyperostosis and could no longer get out of bed to prepare meals, her father would just eat something simple each day and then go out to work in the fields.

When Han Zhen got to this part of her story, she could no longer hold back her tears. It made me think: what was it that sustained this family? It was a sense of responsibility - the responsibility of being parents.

A commitment allowed me to see the responsibilities of being the eldest son in the family, a wish allowed me to see the goodness in Han Zhen's character, and a sense of responsibility allowed me to see the resilience and strength in their parents. Let us pray for this family, and have faith that tomorrow will be better for them!



## Get Inside His Psyche

In order to get inside the psyche of a young child, you will definitely need to be sincere and genuine. Let me hope that, in the summer activities this year, I will have given this child not just a toy car, but also a willingness to open his mind in the future.

- Xiao Zheng

After the freezing rain had passed, as the sky started to clear in the early evening, I was going around in circles in the village's little winding alleyways before I finally found my destination - the home of Pin Pin. Unfortunately, he had gone out to play and was not home. When his brother came out of the house to "welcome" us, his eyes were filled with suspicion and misgivings, and as more and more people noticed our presence and gathered in the courtyard to see what was happening, his voice got weaker and weaker, with obvious unease in his tone. Under these circumstances, we decided to merely say that we were here to recruit students for summer school and had come to find out about the family situation of the children in this household, to invite them to join our summer hobby classes. After quietly informing Pin Pin's older brother about this, we quickly left.

Pin Pin, 11 this year, was in Grade 4 and living with his brother. He was quiet, introverted, and timid. His parents passed away from AIDS several years ago, and that was a big blow to the two brothers. Because they both lacked parental love from a young age, his brother had become a recluse, and Pin Pin himself also did not like to talk much or socialize with people.

We returned the next evening, and this time, we got to see Pin Pin. Emerging from the kitchen, the shy Pin Pin raised his head to take a look at us, and immediately lowered his head again. A man greeted and seated us in the courtyard, while another continued to smoke his pipe in front of the bonfire. As we were chatting away, Pin Pin walked right past us, his head still lowered, into the living room of the house. I followed his silhouette, and saw that there was a flickering TV in the dimly lit living room, and his brother was sitting in front of it. However, the brother's sight was not on the TV but, rather, was fixated on us the uninvited guests. Even after Pin Pin asked him to come out to meet the visitors, his brother was still staring at us with an unnerved and disgusted look but without uttering a word. Seeing that, I immediately asked Pin Pin to come back out. I had him sit next to me and held his hand, which was ice cold with a few wounds on it. I asked him how the wounds came about. He answered with a weak voice like the sound of a mosquito's buzz, so soft that I could not make out what he was saying. I then asked how he was doing at school, if anyone bullied him, and whether he would be interested in joining me at the summer hobby classes. Invariably, he merely shook his head to answer each question. I felt like there was a thick wall separating our minds, and on the two sides of the wall were two entirely different worlds. We asked to see the household register, which was in the home of a relative living not too far away, so Pin Pin went in the dark to fetch it, but he returned empty handed. Therefore, we told him where we were staying for the night, and asked that he bring it to us the following day in his spare time. He nodded but again did not say a word.

The next day, when Pin Pin still had not shown up by late morning, we started to worry whether he would come. As noon came and gone, and there was still no sign of him, we decided to go out for some shopping. However, upon our return, we found that Pin Pin had already been waiting for us for a while. He politely stood up when he saw us, and I invited him in to sit down and gave him some fruit and toys. I then asked if he knew how to play with those toys, but he still seemed reluctant to engage in any conversation. I wanted him to have lunch with me, but no matter what I said, he did not want to do that, and would rather just stay in a corner to play with his toys, so I hurriedly finished my lunch and went to play with him.

By mid-afternoon, I was again worried that he might be hungry and invited him to have some lunch, yet he still refused to do so. I decided to take him out and see if we could buy something that he liked to eat. After walking through a long residential street, we came to a bustling crossroad. That day happened to be market day, and all the villagers had brought out their goods and produce to sell. It was so busy, with people walking back and forth in all kinds of directions, that I was afraid the two of us would be inadvertently separated, so I held his little hand tight, and we went from stall to stall to find something that might interest him. When I saw something unfamiliar, I would ask him, "What is this? What is that?" Gradually, he started to drum up the courage to slowly talk to me, and I could sense a lessening of the timidity in his tone, but his voice was still very weak, and I was still having difficulty understanding him. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the gulf between us was starting to narrow. "Pin Pin, what would you like to have? This big sister will buy it for you, OK?" I asked. Upon hearing that, he grabbed my hand and led me to a toy store, making a beeline towards a racecar, which he picked up and would not let go of. It was obvious that he was quite familiar with this toy store, but up till then, all he was able to do was just to go in and look, as his family could not afford to buy any toy for him. Finally, when this longed for racecar came into his possession, he was so happy that he held it tight against his chest, and I, witnessing this scene, also felt an unspeakable pleasure in my heart. After this episode, he was no longer afraid of me, and when he talked, his voice became noticeably louder and more audible, to the extent that I could almost begin to make out what he was saying. I felt that the door to his psyche was starting to open.

Pin Pin showed up when the hobby classes commenced. At the beginning, he sat at the very back. As he was such a tiny person, I could hardly see him from where I was at the front of the classroom, so I moved him to be seated with a relatively lively child. Initially, he spoke up very little, was afraid to answer questions in class, and dared not look at the camera when pictures were taken. Later on, we instigated a more fun program that involved games in class, scene simulations, and chess matches. I purposely made him participate in these activities, to let the livelier and more cheerful kids play with him and act out simulations with him. This way, everyone became more keen and involved, and the classroom atmosphere turned much livelier. Gradually, Pin Pin's smiles started appearing in our camera lenses, and he was no longer afraid to show himself off in full view of the cameras.

The day before the wrap up review and play-acting of the hobby classes, the classroom had to be decorated in the afternoon after classes were over. Several students, including Pin Pin, volunteered to stay behind to help. After the decoration was complete, we decided to take a group picture in front of the poster. Just as the group had posed for the picture and was waiting for the camera shutter, Pin Pin suddenly ran across the room in front of everyone, mischievously ruining the shot. When we tried it a second time, he did the same thing from the opposite direction. As such, we tried several times without success. People got mad at

him, and chased him around the room, like the way old eagles chase after little chickens, and Pin Pin kept dodging them and hiding around to foil their attempts. Seeing the kids making fun of each other, my heart was filled with immense joy. My efforts had not gone to waste, and two different worlds had merged into one, enjoying the same landscape, the same blue sky, the same white clouds...

Bit by bit, little Pin Pin was turning into a cheerful, mischievous, and lovable child.

Pin Pin was just one typical introvert among the children in this particular class. There are actually many others like him in this world. If we could interact with them more and show them more love and care, every child could become like the winter sun - warm, vibrant, and bright - and can grow up hardily.

### **Who Am I (the author)?**

Xiao Zheng - someone who loves challenges, enjoys serenity, and likes to do crazy things, someone who has a restless and conflicting heart beneath a tranquil exterior.

## My Wish

Fu Fu made me understand a saying: "You can spend a day being happy, or you can spend a day being sad, so why not spend everyday being happy?"

- Xiao Qing

Over the long years and months of our lives, we will inevitably encounter numerous difficulties and setbacks. In those times, the first thing that comes to mind is to search for a glimmer of hope, or seek out help that we can count on, so that we can be recharged and can regain sufficient reason and confidence to go on living, which in turn will enable us to conquer more difficulties, overcome setbacks, and ultimately find our happiness in life. Nothing is perfect in this world, so obviously there is no such thing as a perfect life.

At dawn, as a thin mist rises in the east, a new sun will soon emerge there, beaming its bright light to all corners of the earth, and selflessly giving us all that it can give. As we look in the mirror at our own familiar faces and our warm smiles, hope fills the bottom of our hearts. Such an upbeat mood is what enables us to embark on each new day's work full of confidence, and it was this way that we started our work - the home visits.

There is a boy named Fu Fu in one of the villages. He is 7 this year, short and chubby, and a little bit naughty, but he appears quite dauntless. Every time I see him, he always carries a smile on his face.

The first time my teammates and I came to his village, because we were not familiar with the place, we spent a lot of time poking around without finding our destination. Just when we were feeling helpless, a boy wearing tattered clothes came running towards us. As he approached, he smilingly asked, "What are you here for?"

"We are here looking for certain students," we said.

"Are you from Chi Heng? Is my name on your list?"

"What is your name?"

"Fu Fu," he said as he ran over to us.

This was the first time we met, and he already gave me a great impression. With him leading the way, we successfully found our first stop for our home visits.

The next stop was his home. On the way there, I asked if his parents were home. He told us outright, "My father and mother are both dead. I live with my sister and her husband." My mind suffered a jolt. What kind of special child was this? If he had not told me about his family situation, who would have thought that such a cheerful and indomitable child was an orphan? I could not picture in my mind how he could have psychologically dealt with such a major family upheaval. I then thought to myself, "Since he lives with his sister and her

husband, at least he gets to be loved by somebody." While I was wondering about this point and hoping that I was not thinking this way just to make myself feel better, we had arrived at his home.

As I was walking towards a small structure, Fu Fu suddenly pointed at it and said, "This is where I live." I took a quick look and could not believe my eyes. Starkly in front of me was a tiny bamboo shed, like the ones villagers use for keeping pigs. It was astonishingly barren, with nothing but a bed inside. Nobody could have thought that a child would live there with what remained of his family! I was puzzled, and I asked, "So where do you eat your meals?" Fu Fu then pointed to the house behind the shed and said, "In my sister's house." I looked in the direction he was pointing and saw three modern bungalows. Even though the furnishing inside was very basic, the place looked clean and was overall not bad. I spoke with his sister and enquired about Fu Fu's daily life, but I could sense from her tone that it was challenging for her to have to take care of him. She had a child herself, and only her husband could do manual labor to earn some money, yet he also had his own parents to look after. They were already economically strapped, with a limited source of income, so it was a heavy burden to also have to look after her younger brother. As a result, how much she could do for Fu Fu each day was at the mercy of her husband's mood that day. This situation for Fu Fu's sister is just like that in the colloquial saying, "Although the heart is willing, the ability is wanting."

Who would have thought that, under such circumstances in a seemingly bleak world, and with people's prejudicial gossips around him, Fu Fu could still display such a smile on his face? In our conversation with him, we felt that he had buried his sorrow deep inside his heart just so that he could bring smiles to everyone he came across. We were not sure if we should be happy or sad about this state of affairs, because, even though he continued to grow up and mature, he was clearly deprived of a childhood that should be carefree and joyful. Furthermore, from talking with his sister, we learned that Fu Fu was actually afflicted with tuberculosis, but he could not take any medication for it, as it would counteract the antiretroviral drugs he was taking for HIV. Besides, his sister could not afford any treatment for him anyway. Fu Fu was a dear brother to her, so we could sense the anxiety in her when she told us, "Other kids his age have all grown taller than he has, but I don't know if there is anything I can do about that." My heart palpitated upon hearing this. Such a small child had to bear so much suffering, yet he could still courageously smile at others! This is something even I am not capable of doing. At this point, I found that my tears were uncontrollably rolling down my cheeks. I quickly turned my head away, not wanting Fu Fu to see my tears. In order for him to remain strong and resilient, I had to act the same way, but most of all, I did not want him to be saddened by the sight of my tears.

During our remaining time there, I played with Fu Fu and taught him how to write. Because his sister was always busy and had no time to tutor or supervise him, Fu Fu had still not learned how to write his own name, so I tried teaching him how to write it. However, after a long while, he was still not quite getting it right, yet he merely laughed it off. And so, we decided to go back to playing. Fu Fu normally did not have a playmate. On this day, his face was filled with wide-eyed smiles. Time flew, and a whole afternoon had soon passed. Even though we were all brimming with sweat, we were very happy, and Fu Fu also admitted that this was his happiest time ever. When it was time to say goodbye, I shook Fu Fu's hand and made him promise that, when I next came by to see him, he would have learned how to write his own name. He vigorously nodded his head in agreement, and we departed with a heavy heart.

On the way back, I was full of emotions for a very long time. I was worried about Fu Fu's future. All we could do was to pray for him, wishing that the heavens would have mercy on this poor kid, and that more people with a caring heart would come to pay him visits and soothe his injured soul. To us, Fu Fu is the most terrific boy, because, in his smiles, we saw hope.

**Who Am I (the author)?**

I have a cheerful, uninhibited, and candid character. I love music and reading.

## Life Goes On Because of Love

In the dream, the road ahead is full of thorny bushes and tears, but do not flinch, and courageously go forward instead. Together, we will hold on to the sunlight and pursue happiness!

- Xiao Dan

The weather this summer has just been as unbearably hot as it was in years past. All the same, our summer work goes on as usual in an orderly fashion. My task today was to film the home visit group as they went to see a child named Xiao Tao, so I set out with curiosity as to what I might encounter.

As soon as we got to the gate of the house, we immediately felt an air of gloominess and decay. Upon entering the courtyard, we saw a weathered-face old man of around 70 and a teenager. It looked like they were the people we were looking for.

When we followed them into the house, the scene we saw really tugged at our heartstrings. The elderly woman lying on the bed was the grandmother who had singlehandedly brought up Xiao Tao, but now, before she could see her beloved child become fully grown, she was already on her deathbed, dying from throat cancer. The grandfather, his voice breaking up, told us that they had already made preparations in anticipation of her passing. As he was saying this, little Xiao Tao could not help but kept his head dipped. We had to try hard to suppress our sorrow, holding back the tears that were welling up in our eyes. After all, we still had to continue with our home visit.

Us: Grandpa, we see that grandma is ill. How come we don't see Xiao Tao's parents?

Grandpa: Xiao Tao's mother died 3 months after he was born, and his father died 4 years ago, when Xiao Tao was 6. Both of them died of AIDS. You wouldn't know how it felt for us elderly people to have to bury our own children! Xiao Tao has been with us since he was small. At that time, we could not afford to buy powdered milk, so we just fed him soup. That was how he grew up. I am 75 this year and already have one foot in the grave. After his grandma is gone, I really don't know how I can continue to look after both him and myself.

Us: So, how do you manage life at home right now?

Grandpa: Xiao Tao does not have any land, and although we have 1 acre in the family, I can't work the fields anymore at my age, so we just rely on some financial help from others to get by.

Us: What about other relatives of Xiao Tao's?

Grandpa: He did have an uncle here before, but he has since moved to Xinjiang. Ever since Xiao Tao's mother died, her side of the family has had very little contact with us. They never come to visit, and Xiao Tao doesn't feel like going to see them. Moreover, all the people

around the village somewhat loathe Xiao Tao as well. Xiao Tao doesn't like to talk about it, but he feels it in his heart, so he never goes to have meals in other people's homes.

Upon hearing this, we were a bit puzzled. Usually, everybody is like one big family in a village, and Xiao Tao was such an understanding person, why would people loathe him? Then, when we saw the grandfather's response, we realized what we had missed. He showed us a lab report, on which was written: "Xiao Tao, HIV-positive". It was only then that we realized that all three of them in the family were infected, and that also explained why there were blotches on Xiao Tao's skin. Our hearts sank. This was a very heavy blow indeed.

We had to be extra cautious in our subsequent conversation with Xiao Tao, lest we inadvertently put yet another pin into the pure but already scarred soul of this fragile young man.

Us: Xiao Tao, do you still remember what your parents look like?

Xiao Tao: I have forgotten. Even when I dream of them, their faces are very fuzzy.

Us: Do you miss them?

Xiao Tao: I do.

He sure missed his parents, yet they left this world in such a hurry that he did not even manage to remember the faces of these two most beloved relatives. To Xiao Tao, a child without parental love, the words "father" and "mother" were mere words with no meaning. Would his parents not have wished to see their only son grow up? Yet, heaven had not accorded them such an opportunity. It even took away Xiao Tao's inherent right to live a healthy life.

Us: Xiao Tao, do you abhor the life you have now?

Xiao Tao: No, because I still have my grandpa.

Perhaps we should have felt delight in our hearts hearing this answer from him, as Xiao Tao seemed to be a positive boy, but somehow our hearts were only filled with sorrow.

We noticed the awards pasted on the walls of Xiao Tao's home, and we asked about his aspirations. The little guy looked at us in a sincere fashion and said, "I want to be able to go to university." Although this was a simple and down-to-earth wish, it revealed and encompassed an AIDS child's thirst for life and his love of life.

Eventually, the grandfather raised a request with us - he hoped that we could get Xiao Tao into the orphanage Family of Wisdom and Love, because, given the circumstances, only a charity would be able to bring up this child, and Xiao Tao was also willing to go there.

As we left Xiao Tao's home, I finally could not hold it any longer, and I broke down and cried. Such a small child had to endure so much pain and suffering which someone this age should never have to endure, but there was so little that we could do about it. He had to



witness those dearest to his heart leave this world one after another, yet Xiao Tao still managed to remain resilient and face life with a positive attitude!

Within Chi Heng, there are many, many more little starfish like him - despite having gone through tremendous trials and tribulations, they remain so full of understanding and so positive that it pains our hearts to watch them. In view of starfish like them, we no longer complain about why other children can feign melodrama in front of their parents to garner favors when we cannot even see our own parents one more time; we no longer ask why other children need not take bitter medicine each day when we have to do it secretly, afraid of being seen; we also no longer wonder why other children our age look bigger and taller. It is just that we are afraid, afraid of the darkness in the night with no one to keep us company. We do not ask for much - all we need is a little bit of light, just a tiny bit, enough to illuminate our way forward.

Indeed, life often makes us feel powerless. Since we cannot change what has happened, there is no point in dwelling on it. Just live life with a thankful heart, and happily embrace the present. We have to believe in ourselves and believe in the future, because as long as Chi Heng is here, together with the resilient little starfish's will to live, we believe that we can return to the ocean of fortune.

Happiness is just ahead. Many older brothers and sisters have already got there and are waiting for us to come along. Dear little brothers and sisters, let us give it our best effort, because all the people in this Chi Heng family are courageous, have grit, and are go-getters!

## Hope

As long as there is hope, I will not feel sad.  
Even if darkness swallows everything, the sun  
will still return. I dedicate this story to all the  
brothers and sisters in the big Chi Heng  
family.

- Gao Xi

There is a flame inside each person. It is never extinguished by wind or rain, and it keeps burning bright even if the person hits rock bottom. It is the flame of hope. No matter how down and out or exhausted you are, even if you have utterly failed and are a mess, as long as that flame of hope in your heart stays lit, yearning for all things good, you will realize your dreams and achieve success.

As a member of Chi Heng's home visit team, I went with three others to a village served by Chi Heng on the 27th of last month to start meeting with families. During this trip, I encountered many AIDS-impacted children, and there were numerous moments when I felt shocked and moved, not only by the misfortunes that had befallen them and the difficulties they faced, but more so by their courage and resilience in the face of it all. A pair of sisters, in particular, left me with a deep impression. They were Pei Pei and her younger sibling - both shy yet positive, delicate yet possessing great inner strength.

Pei Pei and her sister are respectively 14 and 12 this year. They also have another younger sister named Xiao Jieh. Having three girls but no boy in a family is quite rare in the rural areas, and although it is not excessive to have three kids, the heavy responsibility of their upbringing makes life extraordinarily difficult for this ill-fated family. Years ago, Pei Pei's parents unfortunately contracted HIV. This diagnosis was a heavy blow to them, impoverished as they already were. Since then, the family fortunes have gone nowhere but downhill. By now, the father has already passed away, and the frail mother has had to singlehandedly take care of her three daughters. You can imagine what a tough life they have.

Even though we were psychologically prepared, we were still shocked at what we saw when we arrived at their home. Pei Pei's house was at the far end of the village, and because of that, it looked and felt remote and desolate. The double doors leaned against the doorframe at an angle, kept from falling off merely by their pressing against each other. While the outside of the house was bare, the inside was equally empty, with basically just four blank walls. It was hard to believe that anyone could live in such a dilapidated house.

The two sisters happened to be at home when we arrived. Both of them were a bit introverted and did not much like to talk. When they first saw us, they seemed to want to avoid us, perhaps due to their timidity. In the conversation that followed, it was mostly their mother who did the talking, with Pei Pei merely adding a few words here and there to supplement what her mother said, or nodding to signal her concurrence.

"Both of them are doing well at school," the girls' mother said, "and just a few days ago, they even took a trip to Zhengzhou." She clearly displayed pleasure telling us this, and she urged them to go fetch their trip memento book to show us. It turned out that they had gone to a Zhengzhou summer camp organized by another charity. On the title page of the memento book was a simple and beautiful drawing done by the sisters, and inside were photographs of the two of them mingling happily with other children or of them individually in various poses. All the photos showed them smiling sweetly, with a sense of fulfillment.

At the end of the summer camp, when the charity's workers asked Pei Pei to pick a present to take home, she chose a digital recorder over a toy, because she figured that she and her sister could use it for schoolwork. Seeing the two sisters so diligent and passionate in the pursuit of knowledge, we really felt happy for them. The new school term will start soon. I wish them every success at school.

The saying "impoverished children take up family responsibilities early on" is very applicable in this case. Pei Pei and her younger sister do not only excel at school but are also thoughtful and conscientious at home. Even though they are in high school, with the heavy homework associated with it, they still help out with cooking and washing clothes at home after school. Because their father died young, they started experiencing the harshness of life at an early age, having to learn to do housework to help out their frail mother. Such experiences have made them more mature and understanding of their circumstances than other children their age. When difficulties arise, Pei Pei is often the one who comforts her mother, to relieve her of anxiety.

Their mother started to choke up when she got to this point in telling us their story. I had a strong feeling that, even though she might harbor some regrets towards her daughters, she also felt deeply fortunate to have them. Upon witnessing this situation, I could not help but feel a sense of sorrow in my heart - how numerous similarly unfortunate people there are in this world! It is just that we don't even know about many of them. I suddenly realized that, although the tiny bit of assistance we could provide them with on this trip might seem insignificant on our part, it could actually be very meaningful to them, so who cares if I am a bit exhausted from doing all this work?

Adolescence should be the most wonderful time in life. These two girls could have been very happy - naive, playful, cheerful, and mischievous - had they not met with such misfortune. But now, instead, they have to face so much hardship and have to learn to be strong amidst adversity. Their eyes showed a kind of nonchalance beyond their age but at the same time also a hint of powerlessness. When asked if they wished to go to university, they did not give a direct answer, but I could see from their shy expression and the slight smile in the corner of their mouths that the answer was 'yes'.

I wish that, despite their naïveté and timidity, they will grow up well and, though impoverished, will remain strong, positive, and unafraid of difficulties. Their harboring aspirations in their hearts, holding on strongly to hope, never complaining of injustice, and passionately pursuing life make me think of the inspirational quote, "As long as there is hope, I will not feel sad. Even if darkness swallows everything, the sun will still return."

During the Chi Heng home visits over the last couple of weeks, I saw one AIDS-impacted family after another and the children in them. Some of them are just starting their schooling now, while others have already entered university. Some of them are positive and strong,

and they pursue an active life, but some are somewhat lost and just muddling along. No matter what, I sincerely hope that all of them will courageously face all adversity, find the flame of hope that safeguards them, and nurture it so that it will burn bright forever.

### Postscript

One deserves to possess something only if one knows how to cherish it. Even though I have fulfilled my dream through my own hard work and got into the university of my choice, I still have a bit of regret about my senior high school life, blaming myself for not knowing how to cherish it back then. So far, my time at university has been the most wonderful and colorful chapter of my life. Though not as ideal and smooth sailing as I originally imagined, university life has enabled me to mature and wise up a great deal. Prior to last summer, it had been a while since I was with young children. Now, thinking back to my time with the village kids during the home visits and summer classes, aside from the warm memory of our time together, I inevitably also harbor a deep concern - that there are so many more unfortunate families and children like them awaiting our help, yet what we have done and can do is so limited. However, I truly believe that love and success lie in everyone's heart. We may be the unfortunate ones, but we are also lucky in another way. We do not use misery as the tool for earning pity from others. Instead, our own resilience and growth is the truly powerful weapon for defeating misfortune, and hope is the light that illuminates the road ahead as we mature. Whether you study at a university or at a technical college, you have not made a bad choice. The key is to persevere and work tenaciously towards your goal. The world out there is magnificent, and it is waiting for you to join in!

2012-03-18

## Could We Not be Separated?

Could we not be separated? To children,  
parents are irreplaceable. Perhaps the  
parents of Xin Xin and Qiang Qiang could be a  
bit more positive.

- Dan Dan

I have been a Chi Heng Foundation sponsored student for quite some time. Prior to that, I had never thought that there would exist such an organization with so many caring people, people who are concerned about a vulnerable group like us and who will extend a helping hand. Their angel-like smiles, warm words, and festive greetings always give us encouraging reasons to re-evaluate ourselves and re-appraise the meaning of life.

Chi Heng is an organization that provides financial assistance to families with special needs, but more than that, it brings to people heartfelt blessings, gives them the courage to live, and conveys tender loving care and a message of hope. It uses action to prove to the world how great the power of love is, and it illustrates the firm belief that where there is love, there is hope.

Having missed the foundation's home visit work the previous year, I finally got my wish and participated during the summer of 2011. I felt very honored to have had this opportunity to make use of whatever I am capable of doing to give the gift of love to people, boost their morale, and provide them with the courage to face hardship. The reason love is endless is that we have love in our hearts, or we have received love, and in turn, we magnify it and convey it to others who need love.

On the morning of July 28, I received a phone call with no number shown on the call display. The mother at the other end seemed distressed in her tone. She said, "Hello, are you guys university students? What do you want with your upcoming visit to my home?" I could feel in her a certain mistrust along with some expectations, so I said, "We are volunteers from the foundation. The purpose of the home visit is to see the children, show that we care about them, and to give them encouragement. We also want to find out how they are doing at school, if there are any changes in the channel of communication with their family, and the health conditions of their parents. This way, we could do our best to provide them with the necessary assistance in a timely manner, and help them live a better and more positive life." She let out a deep breath after I finished, a sign that she had allayed her concerns.

"I am an unfit mother. These days, I rarely go home and rarely phone my children," she mumbled at the other end.

"Don't you miss them?" I was perplexed.

"How could I not miss them? Their father and I dare not face them now, afraid that they will get hurt. They are still young. They don't know our current situation, and I don't want to put any burden on them." She took a long deep breath. "I guess the children must be unhappy about us. Although I rarely phone them or go home to see them, I still miss them everyday."

"Lady, please listen up. We volunteers are also from this kind of families, so I can understand your situation and how you feel. This summer, we have visited many families. Many parents remain very positive and persist in taking their medication, and they are doing quite well health-wise. After all, you have already contracted this disease, and you cannot change reality by remaining pessimistic. Why don't you be more positive, and live life to the fullest?"

I was getting anxious, seeing that these parents chose to live somewhere else, separated from their children, because they were afraid that being with them might bring them harm. They were ravaged by illness and psychological torment, and at the same time tortured by the harshness of life. How could I explain things to them and persuade them to do otherwise?

"Perhaps we are overly worried, but just in case! I dare not phone them, because the more often I phone the harder it gets. They are now under the care of their grandparents, and time will accustom them to life without us by their side. They are still young. I think I'll tell them after they grow up. Perhaps they will understand by then and will no longer blame us." By this point, she was choking up, and I could imagine that, at the other end of the line, there had to be tears all over her face. It must be painful to have to avoid reality this way, and I could not imagine the amount of courage and agony it must have taken to make such a decision.

"How miserable you are to be constantly away from home! Why not come back? Your children must miss you a lot. Even though they are very understanding, they must still feel wronged, and their hearts must be broken. There are many families like yours that choose to stay together, and there is normally no risk of passing on the disease. Believe me, as I am a university student. Your children need you. Even at my age, when I get sick, I still feel lonely and wish that my parents could be by my side. Your children are much younger and need you even more! I hope that, dear lady, you could be more positive and think of the issue from a different angle, couldn't you?" I was really anxious, but this mother was so negative. What could I do?

"Perhaps. Their father is a scavenger in a prefecture level city and is normally not home. Maybe we are being too cynical. Anyway, I hope that you can go see Xin Xin and Qiang Qiang more often, give them more encouragement, and tell them to work hard at school. Their father and I cannot look after them much. We hope you can show them more love and care." She was weeping, full of grief, as she said this. "I am using a public phone, and the phone card charge is running out. I don't want to trouble you any further. Thank you very much."

"Dear lady, you must think through this again and reconsider. Use a positive attitude to address the problem!" I was at a loss about what to do, because, after hearing that mother's candid words, I knew that she had not changed her mind, and I could only seize this last opportunity to try to convince her to look at the issue from a fresh angle.

Xin Xin and Qiang Qiang were two tough children. Even though so much melancholy emanated from their eyes, they still tried hard to put on a smile. The elder one said she missed her mom, but what could she do? Her mother just would not come home. The grandmother said she herself was largely illiterate and also did not know what disease Xin Xin's father had. She only knew that the children's mother used to be very close to them, but

these days, she rarely phoned home and did not seem eager to see her children, coming home only once a year and staying only for a few days each time. Furthermore, due to her having spent so much time away from home, she was no longer close with her children. The grandmother went on to say, "The children's mom said she was happier when she was away, and that, if she stayed home everyday, she would just think of getting sick and would feel bad. So, now, the two children just live with me and their grandfather, but both of us are already failing in health." Her eyes welled up with tears as she was telling us this.

Both grandparents did not understand that the children's parents were well intentioned (although their approach is not appropriate) and erroneously blamed it on their mother. Yet, at the same time, this young couple had to endure so much stress and pain that I really could not imagine how they felt. All I could feel was sadness and powerlessness.

At the debriefing meeting, I reflected this family's situation to my superiors, and the leadership of Chi Heng's Zhoukou office decided to start working on addressing this issue. I am sure it will have a satisfactory ending, because everyone is standing shoulder to shoulder, using our love to build a formidable barrier to keep out the whirlpools of pain. Our love will be a light to illuminate darkness and has the strength to lead us towards a bright future!

Could we not be separated? To this family, such a wish has been a luxury beyond reach for a long time, but I trust that this wish could soon become reality!

### Addendum

This is the first time I have paid such in-depth visits to so many families, and it is shocking that so many of them are living in such misery. During this time, I have varyingly come across anticipative eyes, insistent thankfulness, repaying of love, willingness to hope, and various aspirations for tomorrow. I believe that these children will all grow up hardily, immersed in love.

### **Who Am I (the author)?**

I am an English major. While logical, I am also sentimental, and music is a companion I cannot live without. I am a positive young lady, and I hope to keep marching towards the sun.

## Future, Hope

Chi Heng is the starting point of love. I want  
to take one step, then another, walking with  
Chi Heng, walking with love, all the way in  
search of my hope and my future!

- Xiao Dao

Sunrise, sunset...

Flowers bloom, flowers wither...

Year after year...

A tree lives through climate variations from year to year, as evident in its tree rings. Similarly, life goes through phases of sadness, joy, despair, and exhilaration over time. No one can predict what band of the rainbow a person will land on at the next moment - grey, blue, or red...

I keep staring at the sky, to see if a beautiful rainbow will appear, and I keep asking myself: how much further will it be before I find my hope?

That is unknowable.

The only thing I am sure of is that Chi Heng is the starting point of love. I want to take one step, then another, walking with Chi Heng, walking with love, all the way in search of my hope and my future!

The weather in August is very hot and suffocating. Even hoping for a light breeze is often wishful thinking. I was initially whistling a little tune as I walked along the village lane, but before long, it was really becoming way too hot for me. As my steps got heavier and my pace slowed, I had to remind myself to look up to the sky - although the road to keeping hope alive is hard and long, as long as we work hard at it and travel on it with a smile, the road will be one filled with fortune and blessings!

I had no way of predicting whether, when I finally walked into their home, my approach and what I had to say would touch them, draw a beautiful rainbow in their minds, disperse their gloominess, and make them smile. Thought after thought like this went through my mind as I walked along this lane...

When I descended the slope, I saw a smiling young woman walk towards me, holding the hand of a small boy. Yes, it was Xiao Lei and his mother! As they got closer, she said cordially to me, "You must be Xiao Dao, right?" I said, "Yes, but how do you know that I am the person coming for the home visit today?" She said, "Oh, I just had that feeling. As I saw you approach in the distance, I had this instinctive sense that you were the person who phoned me yesterday saying you would come visit today." We looked at each other and smiled. "You must be very hot and tired," she said. "My home is so remote, yet you have specially come all



the way to see us. How grueling it must be for you!" Then she said apologetically, "Unfortunately, I can't invite you into our house, because there are too many people in there. For special needs families like us, the neighbors will always gossip whenever visitors come, so we had better just sit here and chat instead." I gave her a smile and said, "It's OK. No worries about any fatigue or hardship. The important thing is to come see the kid and give him some encouragement." "I am really very grateful to all of you," she said. "If not for the help of Chi Heng and Mentor To, I really don't know what to do sometimes," she continued on as I listened intently. "Look, we have an old folk and a little one at home. My mother-in-law is ill and can't do anything, yet this little one still has to go to school, so it falls to the two of us sick people to come up with money for all the family expenses, and we are still very much in debt. After the earthquake this year, our house has become no longer livable. His dad and I talked about our situation, and we decided that, no matter what, we wanted to rebuild our house. Otherwise, every time it rains, the elderly and the young will both get soaked. Things are very difficult around here these days. I am glad that at least we have Chi Heng to help my son continue his schooling..."

As I listened to her every sentence - each one so sincere, so heartfelt - I, for a moment, forgot what I had planned to say to her.

In the end, she said, "No matter what, we must not shortchange our child. Although we are afflicted with illness, the child is innocent. He should be able to grow up happily and go on to university, just like other children do. The whole purpose of our toils now is to create better opportunities for him. We didn't want to fall ill, but this is our fate, and we can't do anything about it. Instead of enduring each day in sorrow, we may as well be more positive and live more happily, do whatever we feel like doing, take our medication whenever we need to, and strive to live one more day at a time. That way, I trust that there will still be hope..." She had not yet finished, yet tears were already welling up in my eyes. At that moment, my brain went completely blank, and I did not know what I should say to her. I was deeply moved by her positive attitude, and her self-confidence made me cry with tears of joy. Looking at the distant blue sky, I suddenly interjected with this question, "Look! The sky is so blue I guess it won't rain, will it?" She smiled and nodded in agreement. I then turned towards her and said, "Lady, you have great inner strength. No matter what happens in the future, you have to remain strong and courageous like you are now, because you have a child who embodies the continuance of your life, and life still has to go on. There is hope ahead, and the future will be blue like this sky." She again smiled and nodded in agreement.

We chatted for almost an hour. Finally, when Xiao Lei ran back to us, I asked to have a picture taken with him. The background of that picture is that beautiful blue sky. I think this is the most beautiful picture that I have, because it represents hope for Xiao Lei, my hope, and our collective hope.

I hope that the future is blue, and I trust that the future will be blue. It is a blue that belongs to all our children, and represents the hope for all of them. Because there is Chi Heng, there is hope!

Xiao Dao  
2011-8-14

## **The Summer That Year**

There is no need to view the past as lonely,  
since you will never go back. You should find  
a way to improve the present, because that is  
where you are, and drum up your courage to  
head towards the future without fear.

- Xiao Wang

The summer that year was the second time I was involved with Chi Heng's summer volunteer work. The first part of this work was doing home visits, and the second part was to conduct free summer courses for the children. What I saw at the frontline of home visits deeply saddened me. As I witnessed one family tragedy after another and the misery they brought the families, the experience was unforgettable. I want to say to the children: "There is no need to view the past as lonely, since you will never go back. You should find a way to improve the present, because that is where you are, and drum up your courage to head towards the future without fear. Go, children, go! Our parents are innocent. We should focus on our education and get into the universities we desire. Then, we can find a good job after graduation and enable our parents to have a good life. Only by becoming useful members of society can we repay our communities and our country! The past is already behind us, and we cannot change reality. All we can do is to face reality with courage, be strong, so that we can get out of our predicament and come through our difficulties."

The main purposes of home visits were to update the sponsored children's personal information and to find out about their current situation at home. There were four members in our group, and we went through it all together - persevering through fatigue, enduring the scorching sun, and getting soaked in the rain. Here, I must say to the members of my group, "Thanks to you all!" If not for your coordination and tireless work, we could not have completed our mission of visiting more than 300 children in just over half a month. Despite our exhaustion each day, we were happy when we saw the smiles on the children's faces and those of their parents.

Since my work location this time was the same as that for the previous summer, I once again came to a certain village. I still remember that it was July 25 when we visited the AIDS infected family of Xiao Hua, a visit that made a deep impression on me. The family's economic condition was abysmal. Their house consisted of 3 rooms made of clay and a kitchen made of brick. Furnishing and decor were very basic.

Xiao Hua had an older brother called Xiao Lei, and both of them were going to school under Chi Heng's sponsorship. Their mother had passed away a month prior to our visit, and their father was in poor health with HIV and other illnesses. Xiao Hua's mother used to be healthy, but in order to make enough money to provide a better life for her family, she left it to the two children to care for their father at home and alone went off to work in a factory in Zhejiang. According to Xiao Hua's father, her mother was a tough person who could bear a lot of hardship. After all the other workers had gone home, she would still be working overtime in order to make more money for her family. As a result, she never got enough rest. She did not get enough nutrition either, because, in order to save money on meals, she

would only eat a plain bun and some preserved vegetables when she got very hungry, and she drank nothing but plain water. As time went by, she ended up with blocked coronary arteries, which led to a heart attack, and she died before she could be rushed to the hospital. They tried to resuscitate her there but the attempt was not successful, and a good person was thus lost. Therefore, when she came home a final time, she came home in an urn.

As he got to this point, Xiao Hua's father started to cry in front of us. We could not imagine the pain he was going through. At that moment, I really did not know what to say except to continuously comfort them, in the hope that they would become strong in the face of adversity. We cannot change reality, and only if we face it with courage can we emerge from our difficulties.

Life is short, and we should treasure our lives. After Xiao Hua's mother was gone, there was just Xiao Hua, her older brother, and their father left at home. I could see in her crystal clear eyes her longing for her mother. She really needed her mother's love and her mother's care.

Her father told us that, due to his poor health, he was not able to do any manual labor to earn money, and all summer, he could not even spare the cash to buy the children a single watermelon to eat. Upon hearing that, I immediately pulled out a bit of money from my pocket and gave it to the children. Even though I am not well off myself, it really breaks my heart when I encounter a family situation like theirs. I hope that Chi Heng can give them more financial assistance, and enable Xiao Hua to go on to a university she desires, so that she could get a decent job afterwards and provide her father with a better life.

At the end, as we departed, Xiao Hua stared at us with yearning in her eyes, as if she did not want us to leave. How I had wanted to say to her, "Don't be afraid, little child. No matter what happens, you will not be alone. We will all travel this journey with you!"

I will never forget that summer!

I will always think of that summer!

The summer that year, we were always together in mind and spirit!

Such experiences form an important part of our growing up, and are treasures to me. Thank you, Chi Heng! Finally, I wish that tomorrow will be even better for Chi Heng!

## **The Ray of Hope**

The moment sorrow and despair fade away, a warm glow will emerge from the splendor of dawn. Moving steadily along with and a single-minded firmness, I do not feel lonely at all. Thanks to all my generous companions in life, for providing me with limitless strength and enabling me to time and again reach new heights. Have you noticed that I have always been on this road?

- Ke Er

At every dawn, when the first ray of sun appears, the grief and sorrow of the previous day will gradually disappear. It is another warm beginning, another bright new hope.

The weeklong home visits have come to an end. Although all the running around and hard work only lasted a short period of time, I have gained in the process a lasting memory of many touching moments. The stories recorded below are not merely about poverty, illness, pain, or despair. They are from a camera embedded in my heart, capturing the most real, beautiful, and moving moments.

## **The Most Beautiful Saying**

During the course of home visits, we came across many different families impacted by AIDS. Perhaps, in the eyes of a bystander, all of us seem equally unfortunate, similarly living under the shadow of a horrible disease, and likewise feeling the bitterness of life's hardship and helplessness.

I myself experienced the agony of separation early on, when my mother's life was snuff out by AIDS while I was at a tender and innocent age. My childhood was thus full of challenges, and each step forward was wrought with difficulties. Because of this, I understand the horror of AIDS, and I understand even more the fragility and preciousness of life.

Among the families I visited, some had the progression of their disease relatively under control, while others' illnesses were at a more critical phase. Some families lived a stable life, while some others were still struggling with poverty. However, no matter what, none of them had given up hope. From talking to the AIDS victims, I found out that most of them were diagnosed with the disease in the 2003 countrywide blood test. I could imagine that many families must have fallen into total despair that day, and that many people must have kept tossing and turning all night long, unable to fall sleep. That night must have seemed interminable, as if the passage of time was halted indefinitely so that dawn would never come.

At that time, many people felt that, with a terminal illness, there was nothing worth living for anymore. Yet, in the end, they made it through that difficult period. They were given

proper care and treatment, and, through public education, they were no longer feared and avoided by everyone else. Many of them said this, which I found most touching: "Even though my health is poor and I cannot do any manual labor, I have never given up. It doesn't matter that I can't afford to dress or eat as well as others do. If I could only look after my children for a few more years, it would be worth it." How beautiful a saying that is! Such sentences of unvarnished truth, fully conveying their respect for life and their aspirations, could easily touch the softest corners of my heart.

We must not easily give up hope. Even in difficult, seemingly hopeless, or life-hanging-by-a-thread moments, we still need it to give us strength and comfort.

### **The Most Beautiful Smile**

On the list of families to be visited, relatively few had sick children in them, but Xiao Jing's was one of them. Before I visited Xiao Jing, I did not know that the earlier diagnosis of her younger brother had been in error and that he was subsequently found to be in good health, so I thought that their family was a rare one with two HIV-infected children in it. As I tried to picture their situation in my mind prior to the visit, I was thinking about what a blow it must have been to the family.

At my first sight of Xiao Jing, my heart felt like it had been stabbed. She was such a thin and weak little girl, with delicate shoulders and skinny legs, a pair of shy but big sparkling eyes, and a pretty face. She was at a carefree age, perhaps not yet fully comprehending the horrors of the disease. She might not even understand why she had to take all those bitter pills everyday when other children her age were eating delicious candies.

Xiao Jing, very well mannered, sat quietly next to me during the whole time I was talking to her grandmother. When I occasionally asked about her schoolwork, she would answer me in a delicate voice and display a sheepish smile. In that instant, I was suddenly deeply struck by her smile. That angelic and demure smile was like a flower bud suddenly blossoming, its leaves broadening, with dew falling on its petals, producing the most exquisite music. Time seemed to stand still, and the beauty precipitated by the smile was like that of a transparent pair of wings, simple yet forever awe-inspiring. I let out a sigh inside me, realizing that this life journey for her was going to be extraordinarily difficult. Therefore, I urge you, my dear little girl, to grow up strong, resilient, and full of courage. You will face wind and rain in this process, but you will be like the shelled mollusk, whose soft and delicate body inside its hard and sturdy shell is able to slowly gobble up the harsh-edged sand and produce a bright, round and beautiful pearl in the end. I believe that Xiao Jing, a child with such a beautiful smile, is capable of this. Despite immense difficulties in life, she will continue to turn her face towards the sun, much like sunflowers do, and find her source of warmth.

### **The Most Beautiful Blessings**

I encountered a family that was once broken up by AIDS. Yet, upon reconstitution, it was again clouded by HIV. This is the family of Xiao Meng.

Xiao Meng's father told me about the tortuous tale of his family. His first wife contracted AIDS and departed this world full of reluctance, begrudgingly leaving behind her beloved

daughter and husband. That made him spiritually vulnerable and angry about the unfairness of fate, and he bore immense hatred of HIV for having broken up his happy family. Later on, he decided that he should start anew to once again give himself and his daughter a complete family, so he had someone introduce his present wife to him and remarried to form a new family. Because both of them had come from families broken up by AIDS, they took the extra precaution and went through a comprehensive health check prior to marriage. Nothing out of the ordinary was found at that time, but in a subsequent health check after they tied the knot, his wife was found to have AIDS. It was another heavy blow to him, and a family that was just celebrating their newfound happiness was again shrouded in darkness. After much emotional struggle, his very considerate wife asked for a divorce, as she did not want to be a burden to him. However, he refused her request without any hesitation. He said to her, "I will not divorce you just because you, too, have contracted this disease. Since we are married, we are all one family." What a warm and affectionate term "one family" is. It can transcend illness, adversity, and all fears known or unknown.

Because they are one family, they will enjoy happiness together and shoulder difficulties together. Because they are one family, they will stick together through thick and thin till the very end. Now that they have Xiao Meng, who is growing up happily and in good health, they are enjoying the most wonderful blessings I have seen despite their impoverished conditions.

Perhaps because we are living under the shadow of illness and poverty, each of our lives is like that of a tree leaf, having to endure darkness and often battered by wind and rain. However, more often than not, we are graced by sunlight and can enjoy its glow and its warmth. Nobody has ever given up on us, and so we, too, must not give up on ourselves or give up on our hope. Times of despair will eventually pass, but no one can really lead us out of darkness. We have to seek our own relief, and for that, we must harbor thankfulness and trust that the light of dawn will ultimately come.

## By Your Side

Who will give me a pat on the back when I  
need it most? Who is willing to share his  
happiest moments with me? Days are long,  
but being by your side and watching you  
grow up make me feel energized.

- Ah Liang

It was yet another bright new morning. Normally, I would still be asleep, but this day, I got up early because I had a mission - to participate in this year's summer work. Since the beginning of this work, I felt that I had grown up a lot - in the emotional realm rather than the physical one.

Initially, as I entered one household after another, I did not know how to start the conversation with the people there, and I was often mum, followed by more silence. However, later on, when I had to do home visits on my own, I grew a thick skin in order to be able to talk a lot, and it got easier after I had mastered the techniques for approaching them. I usually started with asking about their daily lives, which I found to be quite effective in engaging them, so I kept using this conversational opener thereafter.

To each and every child among us, the most important are our own parents, and when these people, the dearest of our relatives, leave this world, does it not feel like a stab in the heart? Perhaps only young people like you and me who have lived through it can understand this kind of pain. The similarity in our family situations and our grief have brought us together, making us one big family. Yet, within this big family, each of us also have our own little family to go back to, leading to differences in our life experiences and upbringing. The fortunate children all display the same sense of blessings on their faces. As for the unfortunate ones, their varying family situations and the different kinds of suffering that resulted from them made a deep impression on me, as if they were my own experiences. It made me wonder if the heavens are fair to us at all, having allowed such tragedies to happen on earth. However, it is exactly because of these tragedies that such an ordinary yet unusual group of people has become more resilient than any other and more conscious of the love and warmth that exist on earth. I feel that this is an eternal asset for us, an invisible treasure that none other can match, and is something that we should always cherish.

I am a softhearted person. During the home visits, I would sometimes feel that I had not done enough for them, or that I was too powerless to help. I would blame myself for being unable to do anything other than just listen to what they had to say. But then, being a listener and understanding their situation was the nature of my task, and it enabled me to hear one touching story after another, which tremendously enriched my experience and, at the same time, allowed the subjects of my visits to fully get their feelings off their chests.

I tended to deal with each person or family in a specific way, based on their respective situations, because I knew that different families had different needs, particularly the emotional kind. All our families are under torment, a pain that extends to their relatives as well. In some families, the parents did not tell their children about their own health

conditions in order not to make them worry, and they ended up constantly carrying this huge psychological burden all by themselves, causing them to age much faster. In other families, after the children learned of their parents' conditions, they felt that they needed to work harder to make money in order to give their parents a better life, and, because of that, their own lives became more arduous and more exhausting. Children, even though doing so could show your parents that you can take care of yourselves, it also upsets them, because what they want to see is not what you can do for them, but rather what you yourselves can achieve in the future and how well you will do in life. This is their biggest and final wish. We are actually all very cognizant of our circumstances, and yet, this "cognizance" is sometimes not quite cognizant enough. After all, we are still children and are still somewhat ignorant. The really cognizant ones are those who work hard at school, because they fully understand the wishes of their parents - it is not about how the parents' life could be, but about how the children's own life could turn out to be. That is what the parents are truly concerned about. Even though our parents may not be able to remain with us for long, at least we hope that they will get to watch us grow up healthily while they are still here. We also hope that they will know we have the deepest and purist love for them. If your parents have unfortunately already left you, please do not worry, because the rest of us in the big Chi Heng family are still here, always by your side. You are never alone. We are your brothers and sisters in this big family, and we will share with you all your pain and all your laughter.

At this point, I wish to say to little Ah Xiong, "Be strong! Although your parents are both deceased, this is a reality that you have to face, and you need to become more resilient. We are all in the same boat, all having to similarly stay strong. I hope that you can forget your sorrow and emerge from the shadows of the past. We all know that the sun will rise everyday, and the same applies to life. In order to grow up, you will inevitably have to go through challenges, which you perhaps do not yet fully understand. I hope that you will enjoy a childhood that belongs to you, just like other children do, and thereafter strive towards your life's goal. I have full faith in you that life will remain exciting and wonderful. Go for it!" There is a saying: "Life is comprised of individual days. If you live each day to the fullest, then you will be able to live your life to the fullest!" I wish that everyone would happily live everyday to the fullest.

Although I have only mentioned one person here, I think all other sponsored children among you will know what I mean and therefore understand what you should do. Setbacks in life are inevitable, and each person will experience them. If you do not persevere through wind and rain, how can you see the rainbow that appears afterwards? Therefore, do not be afraid and do not despair, because we will always be by your side and will never leave or abandon you. You are one of us and a member of our family. Although we have pain and sorrow in this family, what we possess even more abundantly are happiness and blessings. Let us shoulder all burdens together, and march forward together hand in hand. Remember, wherever you are, we will always be together!



## Face Everything with Courage

Misery could be an asset in life. An optimistic family like that of Yan Yan should be able to endure misery and turn it into an asset. Let us wish her well always.

- Zhang Mu

If misery is an endless forest that no sunlight can penetrate, and you are frightened by its stillness and unfathomable depth, afraid to move forward a single step, then the mental attitude to face life head on is your compass, pointing you the way forward.

If misery is the boundless snow-covered plains along the Red Army's Long March, the frigid cold and treacherousness of which cause you to lose your sense of direction, then the attitude to face misery head on is the shiny red star on your military hat, which illuminates the way ahead.

There is sunshine as well as rain in life. When facing misery and unbearable burdens, how do you get out of your predicament? How do you take control of your life? Yan Yan's father said, "Face difficulties head on."

I once visited Yan Yan's home. The ground in the courtyard was still wet and muddy from the rain, which made walking on it difficult and uncomfortable, with mud sticking to the sole of the shoes. This setting gave me a downcast feeling right from the start. Adjacent to three brick rooms with tiled roofs was a smaller, even lower, dilapidated annex. It was the kitchen. Except for the green color of the Chinese okra's leaves and the yellow flowers in front of the house, there was no life in the place at all, making the atmosphere rather unbearable. Upon entering the house, I saw a few children playing and reading inside. Everything was extremely basic but at least it was clean.

From her father, I came to understand that her younger brother was only a year old when her mother passed away. Her father could not go out to work because he had to care for the two of them, which kept him busy enough at home. He had very minimal income, harbored a lot of anguish, but had nowhere to vent his grievances. Yan Yan's younger brother was naive but not really cute. I felt pity for him.

It was under these circumstances that their days passed one by one, drearily and rather uneventfully. Sometimes, Yan Yan would wonder if the clouds in the sky had stopped moving, or what direction the wind was blowing, if any at all. Meanwhile, her father's physical health kept deteriorating, both from the toils of life and from his increasing psychological burden - since he was the children's guardian and provider, what would happen if he were to die? Would the children's difficulties not multiply? The more he worried about what would happen to them without him, the more his health declined. Life was hopeless enough, unless one could rise from the ashes like a phoenix. Anyone could figure that.

Some say that misery is an asset in life, but not everyone can cope with the burden of misery. If you fight it and triumph over it, it will become your asset, but if you succumb to it, it will become your humiliation. Yan Yan did not want to fight with anything; she just wanted to peacefully live her own life. Even though they were poor, she had never surrendered to fate. Each morning, she would get up to make breakfast for her father, wash their clothes, then go to school, where her grades were always excellent. In my mind, even though she did not know it, she had already engaged herself in a battle with fate. Her fight came so naturally that she was not even aware of it herself.

No matter how much misery there was in life, the three people in Yan Yan's family had never given up and would never resign to fate. This demonstrates their positive attitude, their optimism, their resilience, and their respect for life. Though afflicted with tuberculosis, Yan Yan still possessed great aspirations - her dream was to get into a good university.

If someone merely suffers from a lot of misery, that is not necessarily touching. What is touching is the attitude with which that person deals with misery. As a great man once said, "Misery is a ladder. To a strong person, it could help you step into heaven, but to a weak person, you will go down it to hell." Yan Yan's life journey is not of her own choosing, but she can choose how to travel along it.

Flowers bloom more beautifully after their baptism by wind and rain. The shelled mollusk produces a smooth round pearl forged by the abrasiveness of sand. "The eye becomes clearer and more sparkling after tears have flowed; the heart becomes warm and caring after living through adversity." Only after experiencing misery does life become solemn and peaceful.

## **Tears of the Purple Seashell**

No matter how big a mistake the adults may have made, the children are innocent. Life itself is innocent. I hope that everyone will respect these lives with a caring heart. What they need is not your sympathy or your pity, but the dignity that life is entitled to have.

- Bei Er

The first time I saw Xiao Yang, he reminded me of a purple seashell, something that is lonely and not generally appreciated. His mournful eyes were full of melancholy. I thought to myself, "The tears of the purple seashell must be bitter!"

People are funny, in that they always consider what they have never been able to possess as blessings. And so, they would pick up one, two, three, even four seashells and put them in a glass jar, fill it with water, so that the seashells could stay together forever and would not be lonely. A friend asked me, "If you could, what color would you give those seashells?" I said, "Purple, because I want to give happiness to things that people do not find acceptable. They have already suffered too much pain; it is about time they enjoy some happiness."

The first time I came to Xiao Yang's home, his mother and eldest uncle were out in the courtyard building a wall along its boundary. When his mother saw us coming, she enthusiastically invited us into her house. Xiao Yang dutifully brought over a few chairs for us but did not utter a single word. In this small, dilapidated clay house, there was only some very basic furniture - a square table and some chairs. They were simple yet neatly arranged. The only item that was somewhat "advanced" was the electric scooter.

Xiao Yang's mother told us, "Xiao Yang is very conscientious and has always helped out with housework since he was small. It is just that he does not like to talk much and does not go out to play. He also keeps any grievances to himself and does not tell us about them. However, he does show in his deeds his love and care for his family." We, too, noticed that Xiao Yang was more mature than other children his age. During the whole time his mother was telling us this, Xiao Yang was clinging to her side but did not join the conversation, and he kept his head lowered. When we asked about Xiao Yang's father, his mother turned rather emotional. With tears suddenly bursting forth, she said, "If not for him, perhaps our lives would not have come to this." It turns out that Xiao Yang's father was rather lazy, and, against the advice of his family, went to sell blood instead of get a proper job. He ended up passing on HIV to Xiao Yang's mother, and, later on, to Xiao Yang via mother-to-child transmission. When he was diagnosed with the disease, he became even more lazy and lackadaisical, and he stopped caring about his family altogether. Whenever he got some money, he would spend it all on eating and drinking for himself, seemingly having forgotten that he still had a family, let alone two children, to support. He did not even bother to ask about how his children were doing. Moreover, he got into arguments with his wife all the time, which was bad for the psychological well-being of his children.

Subsequently, because of poverty, quarrels in the family, and the fact that Xiao Yang was too young to be left home for his mother to go out to work, Xiao Yang's older sister ended up quitting school to find work to support the family. Occasionally, his mother might get an odd job, during which time Xiao Yang would stay with his uncle, who was very meticulous in making sure that Xiao Yang would take his medicine at the prescribed time, not a single dose missed. His uncle told him that he had to persevere in taking the medicine, or he would not get well. However, Xiao Yang was getting tired of it because he had been taking it for so long, particularly because of its bitter aftertaste. "How come other children don't have to take this medicine, but I have to take it everyday? What illness do I have? When will I get well so that I won't have to take it anymore?" As his uncle watched Xiao Yang's tears roll down his cheeks, he could feel Xiao Yang's pain in his heart, but he did not know what to tell him. After all, Xiao Yang was just a young teenager, yet he had to bear so much pain!

When we asked Xiao Yang if he played with the other children, he again kept his head lowered and did not say anything. His mother told us that Xiao Yang used to be very cheerful, but as he grew older, he became introverted and no longer liked to talk, nor did he go out to play. Hearing that, I went over and gave Xiao Yang a tap on the shoulder, "Hello Xiao Yang, a real man has to keep his chin up and hold his head high. It is no good to be keeping the head lowered all the time. You are now turning into a little real man in your family; you have to protect your mother!" Sure enough, Xiao Yang raised his head upon hearing this, and he told us that the other children's parents would not allow their children to play with him. Then, I realized that it was not Xiao Yang who did not want to play with others, but that other adults feared AIDS and worried about possible transmission, and hence would not allow their children to come into contact with someone infected. Xiao Yang understood the sentiments of the neighbors, and therefore stopped going out altogether. Given such a situation, the birth of Xiao Yang was a tragedy. I am not sure if it was an event that should be celebrated or mourned about. His mother initially felt sad about this state of affairs, but Xiao Yang comforted her by saying, "I could entertain myself by watching TV at home." Amidst such loneliness and isolation, an innocent childhood was thus ruined.

We never saw Xiao Yang's father throughout this entire visit and could not help but wonder what kind of a person he was. This gave us the impetus for a return visit, and so, a week later, after the most hectic part of the home visits was over, Xiao Li and I again came to Xiao Yang's home. After asking about how Xiao Yang had been lately, we began chatting with him. Just as he was telling us that he disliked seeing his parents quarrel, his father came home, holding a beer bottle in his hand. As soon as he saw us, he turned around and walked out of the house. Xiao Yang dared not look straight at him and only managed to catch a glimpse of his back. I did not know what was on his mind at that moment, but his reddened face and a drop of tear at the corner of an eye gave a hint - he must have felt very lost. Xiao Yang's mother, on the other hand, got emotional. She said, "We are poor, there is no harmony in the family, and the child is afflicted with illness. How could Xiao Yang possibly be cheerful? I hate his dad; I hate him. It is he who brought all this on us." I subsequently learned that the couple had not spoken to each other for two months, and, just a few days prior, Xiao Yang's father had taken away what little money there was in his wife's purse. Not wanting to see his parents get into a fight again, Xiao Yang softly said to his mother, "I don't want you two to quarrel again. In the future, I'll give you whatever money I make. OK, mom?" Instantly, mother and son held each other in a tight clasp and cried.

A friend of mine once said, "The story is a sad one no matter how you write it, and life is depressing no matter how you play your part in it." Surely, life always plays pranks on you.

How could such a handsome and lovable little boy be already predestined for death by the Grim Reaper? He is so mature and conscientious, and he even aspires to make a lot of money so that his mother could live a better life, yet little does he know that his own life could come to an end at any time! This family has already gone through the kind of suffering described in the Chinese saying, "the tree longs to stay still but the wind will not cease; the son wants to serve his parents but they are no longer around." Yet, what is still to come might well be that the grey-haired generation has to bury the black-haired one. "Xiao Yang is my life, " his mother said, "I can summon up the energy to work only if I get to see Xiao Yang grow up and be healthy, so, however tough it is, I will hang on." Hence, she is very diligent in taking her medicine everyday. "Only if I stay alive can I make sure that no injustice befalls my son. People in the family hold prejudice against this disease, and that troubles me. Sometimes I thought I could escape it all if I died, but then, what would happen to Xiao Yang? He is my son. I have to stay strong and live on for him." Indeed, only if you remain alive can there be hope!

When it was almost time to leave, we asked Xiao Yang what it was that he most wanted to say to his mother. He raised his head, stood in front of his mother, and said, "I love you, mom." At that moment, all his mother could do was to hug him tight, and the two wept uncontrollably. Upon this sight, we were no longer able to press our camera shutter buttons to record the moment, because we realized that such genuine love could only be felt in our hearts.

The tears of the purple seashell are from the wound in a child's soul, a pain that many of us have ignored for too long!

### Postscript

AIDS is a type of disease. You could think of it as a cancer or a transmittable disease, much like many other incurable diseases. Nobody ever wants to become ill, let alone contract an incurable disease. Therefore, as fellow human beings, please do not hold any prejudice against those who are unfortunate enough to have it, and please let the children and their parents live with more dignity. For those who do not know the specific situations, please do not keep cursing those who are ill with it. Although some people say that if all those with AIDS died, then no one else would be threatened by the disease, but have you ever thought of what would happen to their children? How could they survive? If the AIDS sufferers were your own relatives, would you bear letting them commit suicide with poison? Do you really think that doing so could stop the spread of the disease? Such thinking is just too naive, and do not forget that they themselves are victims too! Is it not better to have less prejudice and more compassion in this world?

## **I Want to Say**

### **Excerpts from the heart**

- My dream is to become a medical doctor, to help people who are plagued by illness. At the same time, I see assisting the sick and injured as a way of offering my gift of love to mankind. Life is precious, and each person only gets to live it once, so I must treasure it.
- My parents contracted AIDS from selling blood due to their illiteracy and poverty. I do not want to be like them. I must break free of this rural entrapment, and use knowledge to change my fate.
- My father once told me, "Remember, always reciprocate a tiny drop of favor with a torrent of favors." Indeed, I have never forgotten that. However, since I do not have the power of a torrent, I can only use actual deeds to show my gratitude. I will not bother to keep saying "thank you" or anything similar, because such simple words are inadequate in expressing my gratitude to you.
- I thank you very, very much, Mr. To, for all the care and assistance you have given to those suffering from AIDS. Your help has given me sufficient courage to pull myself out of my dark corner. Even though I am not a particularly outstanding student, you have still taught me how to live and how to treat life. This tiny drop of favor will be repaid with a torrent, I promise.
- I no longer feel lonesome since becoming part of this big Chi Heng family. Realizing that there exist so many kind-hearted people fills my life with hope, and makes me feel that reality has its good side too. It was primarily because of Chi Heng's help that I was able to emerge from a world of sorrow, and now, I understand how important a positive attitude and outlook is to a person's life. Once again, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.
- Your assistance is not just in the material realm, but, more importantly, you have provided us with spiritual comfort. My parents can see the hope in our generation amidst the despondency in their own lives. Our lives are thus filled with both sorrow and hope.
- Your selfless devotion touched me and enabled me to experience the goodness in this world. I have since acquired a deeper understanding of the profession I am studying for (nursing). I believe that I have not chosen the wrong path. What an honor it will be to become a white angel like Florence Nightingale. I want to transform myself into a most qualified white angel, and will devote my utmost to taking care of people's health.

## **Listen to Me**

### **Excerpts of letters from sponsored students**

"I am very happy to receive the money for living expenses you give me each month. I will make full and good use of it and not waste any of it. I am currently a boarder, taking my meals at school everyday, so it costs quite a bit each month, but the monthly living subsidy from you has greatly reduced the burden on my parents. For this, I am forever grateful. If not for your subsidy, perhaps my parents would have a lot more grey hair and wrinkles just worrying about how to make ends meet for the family. Thank you for helping and supporting me all these years, which gives me the drive to work hard at school and continuously propels me forward."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I am a recipient of your subsidy, but deep down inside, I still feel a lot of pressure, especially when I see my grades decline. I am well aware that the purpose of your subsidy is to allow children like me, whose family members suffer from AIDS, to have a good education and attain good grades, but this time, my grades have gone down. Nevertheless, I am not resigned to getting lower grades. I will try my very best to improve and again achieve or surpass the level I was at before. The senior high school final exams are approaching, and that makes me both tense and anxious, but I do want to let myself be tense like a wound spring, so that I can be all psyched up to face the challenge of these imminent exams."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I no longer feel lonesome after joining this big family called Chi Heng. Knowing that there are so many kindhearted people who care about me fills my life with hope, and makes me realize that good things do exist in the real world. I now know the importance of a positive attitude in one's life, and, because of Chi Heng's assistance, I was able to completely emerge from my world of misery. I hereby again thank you all from the bottom of my heart."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Time flies, and I have been under Chi Heng's sponsorship for six years now, from the first year of senior high school to the fourth year of university. During this time, I have grown from a young child into an adult, one who is about to enter the real world. During these six years, I am most grateful to Chi Heng for giving me the most tender care and support, allowing me to be fully immersed in this big Chi Heng family. In particular, after entering university, I have felt even more of this family's warmth and harmony. Of course, as a family, what it provides is not merely material support, but also spiritual encouragement and acceptance."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Chi Heng leads the way for us impoverished children and gives us hope, so that life is no longer so unsettled. Nowadays, the world is very much concerned about this horrible disease called AIDS, something that greatly frightens people, and although we are sheltered

to an extent, we still have to deal with the negative prejudice that comes with AIDS. People are afraid, afraid of coming into contact with us. We don't get to take part in many activities that other children engage in, be it play or work. However, Chi Heng is not afraid. It interacts with us, communicates with us, and comes into contact with us, making us feel that there are still compassionate people on earth, standing shoulder to shoulder with us, fighting this devil of diseases. It gives us a ray of hope amidst all this darkness."

\* \* \* \* \*

"To tell you the truth, I only found out about your organization last year. A schoolmate told me that you helped impoverished students pursue education, so I immediately sent in my application. Last term, your financial help indeed lightened the burden on my family and me tremendously. Let me give you a big bow here, to show my deep gratitude."

\* \* \* \* \*

"There is a saying, 'a drop of favor must be repaid with a torrent of favors.' Today, you are the supporters and funders of my education. Tomorrow, I will be the thankful one in your lives, the one who repays the favor, who builds our nation, and who creates a blueprint for the future. And I will not be alone. Tens of thousands of sponsored students will be like me too."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Perhaps, one day, I will get to meet you. Perhaps you will then discover that I have become an eagle with outstretched wings, and not the ignorant little sparrow that I am today. Because of the firm belief in my heart, because I won't let you down on your expectations of me, and also because of all the people who care about me, I will soar ever higher and will never utter the words 'give up'".

\* \* \* \* \*

"Very soon, I will enter the workforce of the society. I will follow the example of Mentor To and give back to society with all my abilities and a loving heart, so that there will be more tenderness in our society."

\* \* \* \* \*

"In her last moments on her deathbed, mom was still intermittently saying, 'my child ... study well ... at school.' This sentence is very unsettling to me, as I don't know what I should do. Given the situation at home, it is not economically sustainable for me to keep attending school. Yet, if I quit school, I will not be able to fulfill my mother's final wish. I feel extremely troubled."



## **The Concept Behind the Front Cover**

- Zhu Yanru

Chi Heng's support for each "starfish" is not only in terms of the provision of materials and living expenses, but also in caring about their innermost feelings. Chi Heng hopes that each sponsored "starfish" can live like a normal child - able to enjoy physical health and be treated with the dignity a normal person deserves.

The picture on the front cover depicts a group of "starfish" under Chi Heng's sponsorship, living in the wide blue sea. In life, there are inevitably emotions, anxieties, deep thoughts, aspirations, and vulnerabilities that they wish to confide. They need someone to understand their troubles and to sympathize with them, and they need more people who are willing to come into contact with them and become their friends. They put all these wishes into a drift bottle and throw it into the sea, hoping that someone generous and caring will make their dreams come true...

We hope that more kindhearted people will join our "starfish sponsorship program", so that, working together, we can help those in need.