Love in the Service of Hope

Empower Positive Change through Meaningful Volunteerism

Li Po Chun United World College

In an increasingly interconnected world, the power of volunteerism serves as a beacon of hope, fostering empathy, understanding, and active participation to the community. At Li Po Chun United World College, students Mandy and Alex have taken this spirit of service to heart as they initiate support to students with intellectual disabilities at the Caritas Lok Jun School. Their journey not only highlights their commitment to volunteerism but also underscores the strong impact that such experiences can have on both the volunteers and the children they serve.

Backgrounds of the Volunteers

Mandy and Alex joined the college's Quan Cai programme (QC) in the 2024 academic year, a comprehensive initiative that includes creativity, campus service, and community service projects. With 40 activities and 19 community service projects, the QC programme aims to immerse students in various forms of volunteer work, fostering a culture of giving back. As members of this programme, Mandy and Alex join as participants in Year One and soon took on the roles of student leaders in Year Two, driven by a desire to motivate their peers to engage with and support students with special education needs.

Alex, originally from Slovakia, a cheerful student who has a deeply personal connection to the world of special needs. Growing up with an older brother diagnosed with a severe form of autism, he has been a volunteer of a training centre that his brother joined before he moved to Hong Kong for study. He has been surrounded by individuals with different abilities throughout his life. His mother's work at a special school has further cemented his understanding and commitment to developing children and youth with intellectual and physical disabilities. "I found it as a very great opportunity to share part of my experience and help students learn how to engage with children with special needs," Alex explained.

In contrast, Mandy, originally from the Mainland China, a calm and mindful girl who had not been exposed to this community before joining the QC programme. Initially, she felt nervous about interacting with children with disabilities. However, her experiences at Caritas opened her eyes to the diversity and richness of interactions and communication. "It was an eye-opening experience," she shared, emphasizing how the children's unique ways of communicating and expressing themselves, both verbal and non-verbal cues, enriched her understanding of human contact.

Active Involvement in Volunteer Services

The students' involvement with Caritas Lok Jun School has been transformative. The QC programme emphasizes not just participation but also leadership, allowing students to propose and lead their own initiatives. Both Mandy and Alex are dedicated to integrating students from the Lok Jun school with their peers, fostering an inclusive environment where everyone can learn and grow together. They designed handmade, simple, colourful, and playful tools to facilitate "PLAY". They observed, asked, and learnt facial expression, verbal and non-verbal cues from students. All these encounters could not be found in textbook but recognized through personal interaction.

One of the most memorable activities for both students was a session involving handprints, where the children created art using their own handprints. "It was really cute how they interacted with each other during the first session," Mandy recalled. This simple yet meaningful activity allowed for bonding and connection, breaking down barriers of communication and fostering friendships.

Alex also noted the importance of non-verbal communication in his interactions with the children. "Language can be a barrier, but gestures and facial expressions can bridge that gap," he explained. His experiences have motivated him to improve his own "language" skills to better connect with the children, demonstrating the reciprocal nature of learning in these volunteer settings.

Change in Mindset and Action

The experiences of Mandy and Alex have led to significant shifts in their mindsets.

Transformative Experiences: For Alex, each interaction with the children has reinforced his belief in the importance of appreciating the small moments and tiny pieces in life. He recounted a particularly impactful conversation with one of the students, who simply stated, "I just want to go to the playground." This innocent aspiration made Alex reflect on the importance of cherishing simple joys, reminding him to focus on the present rather than always planning for an unpredictable future.

Mandy echoed this sentiment, stating that her experiences have made her more observant of others' reactions and how they respond to her actions. "It's important to remember that life is made up of little moments," she said, emphasizing the need to be pay attention to present and engaged in each valuable interaction.

Skills Development: Both students have honed their skills in empathy, patience, and communication. Mandy highlighted that working with children requires a unique approach, often relying on non-verbal cues to understand

their needs. They kept in mind that they never have the experience as a person who has special needs. Therefore, they try to imagine what the students want, what they intend to communicate. They try not to take away their voice, but "it's about amplifying their voice, even when they can't verbalize their thoughts," Mandy explained.

As leaders in the QC programme, they also face the challenge of guiding new volunteers. They emphasize the importance of persistence, reminding their peers that progress may not always be linear. "If you give up, the child will also give up," Alex cautioned, underscoring the need for continuous encouragement and support, to both the student in Caritas and volunteers from UCW. As leaders, they demonstrated how special designed activities, not just for fun, but for improving kids "motor skill, soft skill, and everything. And I think that is already like more than just doing an activity with them", Alex complimented.

Impact on Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The impact of the students' efforts extends beyond their own personal growth. It significantly benefits the students they support. Students of Caritas Lok Jun School thrive on the interactions and connections fostered through these volunteer sessions. By participating in activities that promote social skills and creativity, these children experience heightened self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Alex and Mandy remember the proactive contact from students who run and hold volunteers' hands to participate in activities.

Mandy shared that many children who initially resisted activities eventually opened and engaged more actively. "It's about creating a safe place and group for them to express themselves." she noted. This nurturing environment allows students to join volunteer activities, explore their interests and develop social and communication skills that can benefit them in life.

Conclusion

The journeys of Mandy and Alex exemplify the transformative power of volunteerism. Their dedication to supporting children with intellectual disabilities has not only enriched their own lives but has also fostered a culture of empathy and inclusion within their school community. As they continue to lead initiatives and inspire their peers, they remind us the essence of understanding and acceptance, the release of potentials and creativity of all students, and the beauty of human connection. Every small act of kindness and support can lead to significant change. As Mandy and Alex look to the future, they remain committed to their cause with unwavering passion. Whether they would participate to the field in developing technology to aid communication for non-verbal individuals, or creating inclusive community spaces, their visions are as inspiring as their actions. I n a world often focused on achievement and success, they remind us to appreciate the simple joys and connections that make life meaningful.