

## Make a New Start

Written by Wong Mun Heng  
Monday, 02 March 2009 00:00

---



Abandoned by her husband, Helma Okar had to provide for her children. Their wooden house on stilts could fall apart anytime. To add to her woes, her nine-year old son has diabetes which requires regular treatment.

Tzu Chi subsidizes Helma's living and medical expenses to lessen her burden, and invited Jonathan, member of Montfort Youth Training Centre, to help rebuild her house so that the family will have a safe shelter.

Helma came from the Philippines more than ten years ago, married a local and bore him nine children. Seven years ago, after the birth of their youngest daughter, her husband left home to work in Kuala Lumpur. Later, she lost contact with him. When her eldest daughter started working in Peninsular Malaysia, she searched for her father. It was then that they discovered he had found a new partner and had abandoned Helma and the children.

To support her family she would get up at 4 am to make cakes and fry rice vermicelli before going out at 5 am to sell them to the neighbourhood. She has three children working in West Malaysia, but their meager income is barely enough for themselves.

Helma is also very concerned for her five children who do not have birth certificates, thus making their admission to school a problem. Being a non-Malaysian, there is nothing she could do. "With or without birth certificates, I could not afford to send them to school," Helma lamented.

### **Like adding salt to the wound**

In 2007, her seventh child, Dato, was diagnosed with diabetes and requires regular medical treatment. To monitor Dato's blood glucose, four blood tests are needed daily, but Helma did not have the money to buy the glucose meter and glucose test strips. With the additional medical cost of her son, Helma's meager income was really stretched to the limit.

Tzu Chi volunteers from Kota Kinabalu visited the family after receiving a report from hospital. As Helma's house was on the outskirts of town, it took a while for the volunteers to locate it. What they found was a dilapidated house that depicted Helma's emotional state of mind.



The 200 sq ft wooden house on stilts was built by Helma's husband nine years ago. However, the condition of the house had deteriorated over time. Even without windows, lights could be seen seeping through the cracks and filtering into the house. Due to their financial constraints, Helma's family has been living without electricity and water supply. They had to rely on oil lamps at night and pay their neighbour for using his water.

## **Make a New Start**

Written by Wong Mun Heng  
Monday, 02 March 2009 00:00

---

In June 2007, Tzu Chi began to subsidize the family and Dato's medical expenses. When they took on Helma's case, they also discovered a beach near her house with lots of rubbish, like plastic bottles and aluminium cans that were washed ashore. The volunteers wasted no time in explaining the process of recycling to Helma and her children.

"The bottles and cans are actually of good value if they are recycled. Hence, we have the saying, 'turning trash into gold and gold into loving-kindness'." The volunteers explained to Helma and her children the importance of recycling, not just for environmental protection, but also as a source of income for Tzu Chi's charitable activities. Since then, Dato has been actively combing the beach for recyclable resources and bringing them home. Influenced by Dato, quite a number of his friends have also joined in to become the recycling corps of the village.

### **Join hand to provide a safe shelter**

As her living condition is in such a deplorable state, the volunteers rented another house for Helma and family, but she did not move in because she was worried that her existing house might be occupied by others. Every time it rained, her house would shake violently and she had to take refuge in her neighbour's house. Helma did not mind going through all these hassles and inconvenience as long as she could keep her house. Tzu Chi volunteers sympathized with her.

Later, through a charity case, the volunteers met Jonathan, a member of Montfort Youth Training Centre.

Montfort Youth Training Centre is a vocational training centre for school dropouts from poor families. The Centre provides free vocational training so that the youngsters can learn a skill and earn a decent living for themselves and their family.

When volunteers discovered that Jonathan has been building houses for the underprivileged for free, they decided to approach him to help rebuild Helma's house. Jonathan agreed readily after understanding Tzu Chi's philosophy. He was responsible for the construction and Tzu Chi sponsored the materials.

In May 2009, Jonathan went with volunteers to take a look at Helma's house. Being an experienced builder, he easily sized up the repair work needed. They would strengthen and straighten the walls, repair the flooring and reinforce its support, and add reinforcement to the stilts. They would provide Helma with a water tank to collect rain water. It was decided that the repair work would commence the following month.

On June 27, eight volunteers together with Jonathan and his four staff arrived at Helma's house. First they removed the wall which came off easily. According to Jonathan, without any repair work done, the house could only last till the end of the year. After the repairs, the house will easily provide Helma and her family a safe shelter for many years.

## Make a New Start

Written by Wong Mun Heng  
Monday, 02 March 2009 00:00

---

