

An Expanded Family

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Saturday, 26 September 2015 16:30



Headlights lit the ramp as a car left the basement parking lot of the Kaohsiung Jing Si Hall. Silence returned to the ramp as the car drove away. The scene was repeated many times that evening, but it was doubtful that any of the drivers noticed the sliver of light seeping from a crack between a door and its frame in the basement.

Lai Ling-yin (賴玲茵) was working behind that door, in the stock room for the Kaohsiung chapter of the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA). Things were well organized there, neatly stacked or lined up in an orderly fashion. Lai was picking out medicine, equipment, and supplies that she and her fellow TIMA members would need the coming Sunday, when they would hold a free clinic up in a mountain area.

“Abdominal ultrasound equipment, wet wipes, small towels, small pillows, gel, pens...,” she murmured, as she went up and down a narrow aisle, picking things out and ticking them off a checklist. She wanted to make certain that she had not left anything out. “Don’t forget—the blood sugar meter needs to be recalibrated,” she reminded herself.

Lai joined TIMA when the association was set up in 1996 to provide free medical care for the needy. She has since participated in monthly clinics in the mountains, taking medical care to people living in remote areas. The clinics are important to her and have become an indispensable part of her life.



A new family

One day in 1990, Lai went to Hualien with Tzu Chi volunteer Weng Hui-zhen (翁惠珍) to visit the Jing Si Abode, the Buddhist convent founded by Master Cheng Yen.

Lai had heard about Tzu Chi before the trip, but she had not expected that Master Cheng Yen, who had taken on so much work to help people in need, would be so frail and thin. Lai was mesmerized as she listened to the Master talk in her soft voice. At one point, Weng looked at Lai, who was deep in thought, and asked her, “Are you okay?” Lai turned, nodded, and said, “Tzu Chi is really a good group.”

Later, they visited Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital. Lai saw rows of wheelchairs parked outside the hospital for the convenience of patients with limited mobility. She also saw Tzu Chi volunteers standing at the front entrance warmly greeting patients and their families, and if necessary, guiding them to their destinations or giving them whatever assistance they needed.

When they stepped inside the lobby, Lai was immediately attracted to a large mosaic mural

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depicting the Buddha caring for a sick monk. The Buddha, with a warm smile on his face, was bending forward to tend to the monk, while the patient's facial expression seemed to be pleading, "I'm in pain, please help me."

The picture touched a chord in Lai. She suddenly felt that she could have been a better nurse and done more for her patients over her years in the medical profession. She went back to her job with a good impression of Tzu Chi imprinted on her mind, and she decided to join the foundation. As a home nurse, Lai, who retired in 2011, often had to visit patients, many paralyzed, in their homes. One day she went to the home of a bedridden old woman who was cared for mainly by her daughter-in-law. "No matter how hard I try, she still doesn't feel well. I don't know what else to do," the daughter-in-law complained to Lai.

Lai felt the old woman's distended abdomen. Then, without a word, she put on gloves and extracted from her something that had been inside far too long: stool. Finally, Lai finished the job and straightened up. The old woman looked relieved. The daughter-in-law was stunned. She had learned something new and useful. She promised Lai that she would do better for her mother-in-law in the future.



Lai's background in medicine also came in handy when she began helping with Tzu Chi bone marrow donation drives. Back then, bone marrow donation was much misunderstood in Taiwan. Although it was a good cause, it was not an easy one to promote. Still, Lai joined the effort to help educate the public. She also recruited medical care providers to work in the drives and answer questions from the public. She did not mind the hard work involved at all. One day she dressed up for a concert at the Kaohsiung Culture Center. When she got there, somebody called her from behind. It was volunteer Xu Xue-e (許雪娥), who led a bone marrow donation promotion team in Kaohsiung. They happened to be holding a marrow drive there that day.

"We need nurses to draw blood. You must help us out, please," Xu pleaded. Without another thought for the concert, Lai joined her. One day one of Lai's colleagues said to her, "Ling-yin, you seem to be different these days." Lai knew that the change had been brought about by Tzu Chi.

An expanded circle of love

Lai's entire existence used to center on her family. She did not think that she possessed any talents or skills to help people outside her world, and as a result she mostly stayed inside her little circle. But that changed after she joined Tzu Chi. Her work there enabled her to expand her circle of love.

Near the end of the 20th century, anti-Chinese violence erupted in Indonesia. It was not the best time for ethnic Chinese people to be in that nation, but Lai went there anyway to

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participate in a free clinic.

She saw many children there with cleft lips. Their families could not afford the corrective surgery, so they came to the free clinic for help. At the venue, Lai assisted Dr. Siu Chuan Leh (李秋川), from the Philippines. She worked all day long as the doctor operated on one patient after another. Like a busy bee completely absorbed in her work, she only began to feel the physical toll when she returned that evening to her hotel room. Her feet hurt like crazy, but she had never felt happier.

In September 1999, a strong earthquake wreaked havoc in the central part of Taiwan and killed more than 2,400 people. Lai went with a TIMA team to Puli, one of the disaster areas, to provide medical care for the injured. She was saddened by the devastation she saw, but she had no time to be reflective. There were too many people to be treated.

After a busy spell, she stepped out of the tent to take a break and saw a boy all alone. She was drawn to the lone figure. “Who are you waiting for?” she asked him.

“My mom and dad,” he replied, his face expressionless.

“Where are they?” Lai continued. “They’re both dead. I’m all alone,” he answered. Lai was rendered speechless.

After that, Tzu Chi volunteers always got the boy to eat with them in their tent. The boy’s relatives went there several times to pick him up, but he refused to leave the place. He said that he wouldn’t leave until his parents arrived to take him home. Lai could not help feeling sad each time she saw him; she would cry when people weren’t looking. She thought of her own children at home, one of them just three years old.

Before Lai’s departure for the disaster zone, her husband suggested that she not call home. “Go in peace,” he said. “Don’t call home. The younger one is so little. Your voice would only make her cry for you.” And so she did not call the whole week that she was in Puli. She sometimes felt guilty for leaving her own children a whole week without their mother, but when she saw this little orphaned boy, she felt that her children were truly blessed—after all, they still had a mother.

Lai later made a second trip to Puli for another round of help. As she was getting ready to go home on the last day of that mission, she learned that an injured old man needed help.

He had burned himself on the thigh while cooking a meal shortly after the earthquake. Because medical care was scarce in the aftermath of such a major disaster, he had been treated only once. He did not have the nerve to change the dressing himself. Only when he could no longer stand the pain did he seek help from Tzu Chi volunteers.

Lai visited him at his home. His wife, looking worried, sat off to one side in the living room. The gauze on the old man’s thigh was a bit loose; there were brown stains on it, already dried and fading in color. Lai squatted down, removed the bandage, and leaned in close to the

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burn. She sniffed, checking for the presence of odors that might indicate infection. When she was satisfied there was none, she proceeded to apply medicine and put on a new dressing. Her touch was careful and gentle to avoid hurting the man. When she was done, the old man heaved a sigh of relief and remarked, "It feels really good. Real good." Lai was very happy to hear that. Though the trip to treat the old man had made it necessary to postpone her return home, she felt that that extra time spent was well worth it.



Doing more

When Lai retired from her job as a professional home nurse in 2011, she took on the responsibility of coordinating volunteers to fill the slots on the duty calendars for the clinic in the Kaohsiung Jing Si Hall. Though finding volunteers to staff a shift shouldn't have been too hard, Lai had her share of difficulties. She once had to make more than 60 phone calls just to fill slots for a four-hour period.

Daunting though that might seem, it was actually not nearly as disheartening as a missed shift, when a person failed to show up as promised. There were times when she felt like resigning as coordinator.

But never one to dwell on negative thoughts, she would soon bounce back. She would tell herself, "If it were easy, they wouldn't need me to do it. Doing difficult things is more fun." She stayed with it, and gradually scheduling became a snap. Now she only needs to post an empty calendar in the clinic, and all the slots are taken within just a few days.

The clinic functions well, especially when a large event is being held. On May 11, 2014, for example, a Buddha Day ceremony was held at the Jing Si Hall. The clinic opened at 6:30 that morning to handle any first-aid situations as well as routine matters.

The clinic was busy throughout that day: A culinary volunteer cut herself; a photographer experienced eyestrain; a child separated from his parents was brought to the clinic to wait for his parents to claim him. It seemed like an endless stream of patients. Some volunteers, who probably got up too early that morning, felt dizzy, so clinic workers checked their blood pressures. As soon as the volunteers learned that their blood pressures were fine, they went back to work, but not before they had expressed their thanks to the volunteers who had served them. "It's so nice to have the clinic around," they said.



Keeping the resolve fresh

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Lai truly liked Tzu Chi, and so she wanted her fellow volunteer medical workers to learn more about the foundation. She started a study group in 2014 to share the origin of the foundation and to immerse the group in the Medicine Buddha Sutra in hopes that it would help them stay true to their vows to serve patients. With reaffirmed resolve, they would be able to face each day of service with fresh vigor and enthusiasm.

Lai spent most of her time on Tzu Chi activities after her retirement, but she never underwent the necessary training process to become a certified volunteer. She felt that she was a more casual type of person. She didn't want any faux pas on her part to affect the public image of Tzu Chi volunteers, so she remained uncertified. Her attitude didn't change until she visited the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan struck that nation in November 2013. She went with a Tzu Chi relief delegation to Tacloban, a severely damaged disaster zone. She saw how widespread the destruction was and how many people's lives had been affected. Her heart went out to the victims, and she could not for a moment contain her emotions.

Lai cried with the victims during every aid distribution and prayer gathering. She didn't know why, but something that the Master often said crossed her mind repeatedly: "Time is running out." It was there in Tacloban that she made the decision to train to be a certified volunteer. She knew that this was a serious commitment. It symbolized a covenant with the Master to dedicate herself to the work of Tzu Chi and be willing to take on responsibilities. Somehow Lai felt it was time she made that commitment—she was ready for it.

When she returned to Taiwan, she began training—23 years after she saw Master Cheng Yen for the first time in 1990. At the same time, she continued volunteering and serving people in need.

There was a man who lived in a remote area in the mountains of Liugui, Kaohsiung. He was 87 years old, blind, and lived alone. Lai and her fellow TIMA volunteers made a point of visiting him after they had finished their monthly free clinic in Liugui.

The old man would not wash himself, nor would he allow volunteers to do it for him. They had tried several times and failed. However, they could not just let the matter go because his refusal to wash himself had led to a skin condition.

One day in late April 2014, the TIMA cohort visited the old man again. After their usual exhortations to let them wash him failed again, they decided to take another approach. Two of the volunteers went into the old man's house to get hot water and towels ready. When those were brought out, volunteers began singing to distract the old man. Taking advantage of a moment when he was absorbed in their singing and clapping, Lai and another volunteer, Wei Rui-qin (魏瑞琴), began wiping him off. The man protested when he noticed what was happening, but in the end allowed them to continue.

Soon the warm water in the washbowl turned cloudy. They got more fresh water, and then even more. Lai and Wei were sweating profusely when they finally completed the momentous act.

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“Let me clip your toenails,” Lai suggested to the old man. Holding his callous, cracked foot, she thought of her own parents, who were themselves getting on in years. She felt like crying. As she tried to hold back her tears, she felt so grateful that she had joined Tzu Chi. Seeing the smile on the man’s face, she felt certain that she had chosen a life path that would make her parents proud. She felt even more certain that she would never regret her choice.

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