

Valuable Good Seed

Written by Lin Sen-shou
Wednesday, 25 April 2007 00:00



Qiang was born with a moderate mental disability, which caused unspeakable pain for his parents. For more than two decades, the family has taken him to receive special education. No miracle has happened, but the hardship of looking after him has been transformed into joy. Nowadays, Qiang uses his cheerful smile to win friends and pave his own future. As his mother said, “Qiang is not a fleck of floating dust, but a seed of goodness.”

Qiang (强) passionately sang his favorite song, which had been rewritten using the melody of You'll Win If You Work Hard. When he finished singing, the audience gave him a thunderous ovation.

During Tzu Chi activities in the Tianmu district of Taipei, Qiang often passes on the accolades to other performers. “Good! Wonderful!” This gracious response brings more smiles and applause. And he is often seen greeting other volunteers. This makes him an excellent PR person in the eyes of the volunteers.

Qiang, 31, has a moderate mental disability, but he always says decent words and thinks of lines from Jing Si Aphorisms by Master Cheng Yen. Once he accompanied his mother, Zhong Yu-ying (钟玉莹), to collect donations for Tzu Chi. Zhong urged him to walk faster, and he replied, “Waste no time and take each step firmly.” Zhong smiled at the words, because Qiang was quoting an aphorism from Master Cheng Yen.

“Qiang is a smart kid,” his father, Chen Yao-xuan (陈尧轩), proudly said. From the sweet expressions on the parents’ faces, it’s hard to imagine the unspeakable pain they went through when Qiang was younger.

“Qiang’s birth brought delight to the whole family. I tried my best to be a good mother, but I had to face a difficult reality.”

Zhong became a mother for the first time in 1978. After two days of labor the baby was born, and his parents named him Zong-yan (宗彦). But strangely, the baby didn’t eat during the daytime and didn’t sleep at night. The couple had no experience in taking care of children, so they often had to take turns holding the baby until dawn, an arduous task for both of them. Zhong’s aunt couldn’t stand it anymore and took over the care. The aunt nicknamed the baby “Qiang” after a character in a popular TV children’s show.



After a few months Qiang became stronger, and Zhong then took the boy home. Normally, a baby would learn to sit, crawl and grow teeth at the appropriate times, but the boy never showed any signs of all this. Friends assured Zhong that her baby boy was just a late starter and that she shouldn’t worry about it since he would catch up quickly.

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When Qiang was three, he still could neither talk nor walk. Zhong finally mustered up some courage and took him to the doctor. The doctor assessed the boy's I.Q. at only 60! Zhong couldn't believe it, so she took him to a medical center for a chromosome test.

When the report came out, the doctor told Zhong, "Your son's chromosomes are abnormal, but please don't feel upset. With your love and patience, your son may prove to be a miracle someday."

Ever since her son was born, Zhong had tried to be a good mother. She listened to talks by childcare professionals, read magazines and books, and consulted with her friends on how best to raise a child. "I wanted to give him the best of everything, but I didn't expect that he would be so slow in his growth that he couldn't enjoy what I gave him!"

The sudden, unexpected news was hard to accept, but the doctor's words still gave Zhong hope. She believed that a miracle would happen if she worked hard enough.

Every day, Zhong and Qiang would take along their boxed lunches to a kindergarten with a special education class. Over 20 years ago, the tuition of NT\$5,000 (US\$125) along with their house mortgage of another NT\$5,000 every month were extremely hard on the couple. Unfortunately, Qiang's condition did not improve, but Zhong still persisted with the special education for her son.

When it was time for elementary school, Qiang was assigned to a school with a class for mentally challenged children. One day when Zhong picked him up after school, a teacher said to her, "It's so difficult to teach your son! I've been trying to teach him to write for a long time, but he still can't master it!" These words pierced through Zhong's heart like a knife, and she really wanted to make some sharp retort. But she held back her anger because she feared that the teacher might not even try to teach Qiang.

Zhong decided to teach her son how to write at home. She put her hand over his to hold a pencil and showed him how to write. But after a while, she lost her patience and started beating the desk with a bamboo stick and yelling at him. When Qiang cried, she cried too.

Zhong was embarrassed when she recalled that back in those tense days, even people living a block away could hear her yelling and crying too.



"My son is different from other people, but I had to learn to accept him proudly before everyone else would accept him."

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Even though Zhong could learn to accept her mentally challenged child, she couldn't accept the strange looks from her friends, relatives or even strangers. One day a relative came for a visit. Not wanting the relative to see her son, Zhong immediately locked him up in a room. However, the boy's cries pierced through the door. She was so embarrassed that she just wanted to dig a hole in the floor and hide in it. After that the family turned away all visitors, and Qiang was like an invisible person.

Nevertheless, Zhong gradually sensed that her attitude was having an ill effect on Qiang's younger brother and sister. They felt inferior about themselves because they were ashamed that their older brother was mentally challenged. They didn't even want their classmates to know that they had a brother like that.

"My son was different from other people, but I had to learn to accept him proudly before anyone else would do the same." Zhong didn't want to accept that the weak were still being treated unfairly in modern times, so she invited children over to her home and introduced Qiang to them by saying, "He has injuries to his head, so he can't talk much. I know you are loving people, so I'm sure you will learn to love him too." Slowly, her two younger children were able to face their friends again without a sense of inferiority.

Zhong also put a lot of effort into getting her husband to face reality. Chen's colleagues often praised him as having everything a man could want: a house, a wife, a car, and a son. However, he always tried to change the subject of the conversation. Zhong knew that her husband was ashamed of their son and didn't want other people to know that he had a mental disability.

Zhong hated it when her husband played mahjong; she once even attempted to commit suicide because of his heavy gambling. Then one day, without her husband's knowledge, she invited her husband's three mahjong partners to their house for a delicious meal, and she purposely let Qiang play in the living room. One friend stared at Qiang, and Zhong told him bravely, "Qiang's brain is developing slower than other kids'." After that day, her husband could talk about his family in a more comfortable manner.

"I cried in my heart: Why me? But I didn't want to give up so easily. I wanted to overcome the difficulties."

"After Qiang finishes high school, where can he go?" Zhong was working during the daytime, and she couldn't leave Qiang alone in the house. She had to think of a way to handle this problem. One month before Qiang's graduation, the Yu-Chen Social Welfare Foundation established the Taipei Yu-Chen Yu-Ming Developmental Center, a job training center for mentally challenged people. Zhong decided to let Qiang attend the center.

However, there was another major problem: It was costly to take Qiang to the training center by taxi every morning. A teacher suggested that Qiang learn to travel by bus. Therefore, they started the training in the summer, before school began. Each day, the teacher would take Qiang to the bus stop in Shipai, where the training center was. Zhong would secretly get on the same bus as Qiang and watch to make sure he got off at the right stop. His sister would be waiting for him at the stop in Tianmu, where they lived. They all worked hard together to train

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Qiang to take the bus.

Qiang was very happy at the training center, and the teachers were very patient with him. He originally had problems coordinating his hands and feet, but now he can use an electric sewing machine and produce dusting cloths for sale for the center.

“When I heard that Qiang was mentally challenged, I was heartbroken. I wondered why this was happening to me,” recalled Zhong. In 1998, her marriage was severely strained and she became extremely depressed. But then she came to know Tzu Chi.

With the companionship of Master De Ning, a Buddhist nun, and other volunteers, Zhong started her busy and meaningful volunteer work. She tried to rediscover the value of life and to forget about her complaints. A phrase from Jing Si Aphorisms, “Work willingly and accept the results joyfully,” allowed her to face things gratefully and to accept the tests joyfully.

In order to train Qiang to be independent, Zhong strictly demands that he make his own bed when he gets up in the morning. She teaches him to clean up his desk, to do recycling, and to memorize the lyrics of Tzu Chi songs.

Qiang is capable of brushing his teeth, washing his face, and taking showers, but Zhong occasionally needs to help make him tidier. Her biggest worry now is that Qiang has to learn to wait: he becomes agitated when he has to wait even for a short while. Zhong is still patiently teaching him this virtue through Tzu Chi activities. She believes that he will improve one day.

Zhong and Qiang are always together doing recycling, attending Tzu Chi activities, collecting donations, etc. At a recycling station, Zhong showed Qiang how to do recycling, and then she asked him, “What is the purpose of recycling?”

Qiang replied with a strong, loud voice, “To clean up the land!”

Zhong has also taught her son not to take things that belong to other people. Qiang has learned that a person must be honest and upright.

“Every time he comes home, the first words he says are, ‘Mom, I’m home!’ ‘Mom, the lunch you made for me was delicious!’”

Once when mother and son were entering their home, Qiang found that the door was stuck. After he had pushed it open, he held it and said, “Mom, you go first.” Zhong was impressed by his thoughtfulness.

However, there are still times when Qiang gives his mother headaches. The doctor warned that Qiang must stay fit, but he is not very physically active and he likes to eat junk food, so Zhong controls his diet strictly. As a result, Qiang gets hungry easily and eats cookies at midnight while everyone else is sleeping, or he hides food in his closet or behind his desk.

“Once he smeared ketchup, mustard, and black ink on the bedroom wall. By the time I discovered it, they had dried. I took a deep breath and told myself not to get angry, and I

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chanted the name of Great Compassion Guan Yin Bodhisattva in my mind to calm down. Then, I put aside my work and taught him patiently how to clean up the whole thing.”

Zhong thinks that since she is a Tzu Chi commissioner and has vowed to embark on the path of spiritual cultivation, she must learn to overcome all tests with wisdom.



“If I had gotten in touch with Tzu Chi earlier, I would have better understood the hardship that Qiang’s elementary school teacher experienced. If I had gotten in touch with Tzu Chi earlier, I would have understood that when people kept staring at Qiang, they weren’t pitying us for having such a baby, but instead they were thinking how brave we were to bring this child out in public.” [In Taiwan, some parents are too ashamed to take their mentally challenged kids out in public; some older people even forbid their mentally challenged grandchildren to leave home at all because they don’t want other people to know.]

It was the sincere acceptance by Tzu Chi volunteers that emboldened Zhong to take Qiang to Tzu Chi activities. “It’s okay for you to bring him here. If he gets noisy, then you can take him outside for a while.”

With such encouragement, Zhong takes Qiang to every Tzu Chi activity. Whenever Qiang behaves himself, the volunteers praise him: “Good boy!” “Qiang, you’re getting better!”

With tears in her eyes, Zhong said, “It’s with the volunteers’ blessings that Qiang indeed is getting better.”

Life is impermanent. Zhong said, “I don’t know whether Qiang or I will pass away first, but as long as I’m alive, I will take Qiang out in the world to overcome all his difficulties and do good deeds.”

“Women are physically weaker than men, but they become strong when they become mothers.” Zhong’s tenacious motherly love is teaching Qiang to become a big boy that everyone loves to see. She takes him to donate blood and solicit funds and to participate in other opportunities to help people. Even her husband, who once broke her heart, has also become a Tzu Chi volunteer.

“Qiang’s existence used to be a heavy burden I couldn’t unload,” Chen admitted. “Whenever I saw him behave badly or I just didn’t like seeing him, I would beat him.”

After he started driving his wife to Tzu Chi activities and gained a better understanding of the foundation, his unpleasant attitudes gradually changed. “I read the Master’s Jing Si Aphorisms, and I saw how Tzu Chi volunteers were putting her philosophy into practice and enriching the quality of their everyday lives. Through interacting with them, I gradually discovered that they

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loved Qiang far more than I did as a father.” Chen said with embarrassment that he didn’t accept Qiang until he joined Tzu Chi. He said that the past 20 some years were full of hardship, and he didn’t really want to look back.

Now embraced by Tzu Chi’s Great Love, the family are learning to give help without expecting anything in return. “Since my husband joined Tzu Chi, he has been learning to become a good husband and a good father,” said Zhong, her eyes sparkling with satisfaction and bliss.



Blessings Make Him Better

Looking back at those years as Qiang was growing up, I never thought of giving up on him or felt too exhausted to continue. Perhaps I’m just like other mothers. When children are born, we have the responsibility to raise them.

Everyone in my family has to face certain difficulties because Qiang is different. Even Qiang’s younger siblings have their burdens and pressures to bear. Even so, they do their best to adjust. It’s hard for them to play with Qiang, yet his younger brother once said, “My brother doesn’t know anything, but I feel safe with him at home.”

The three children are all part of my heart, whether they are smart or not. And they are also my biggest motivation to live.

Ever since Qiang was four, I have never kept him out of special education, because I feel it gives him special stimulation and teaches him things that I can’t. My husband and I often felt a sense of failure from having to teach him the same details over and over.

One day I saw a program on TV about sterility, and I cried. So many couples have to endure so much torment in order to have a baby, but here we would get frustrated over our children’s noise.

I am grateful to have Qiang’s company whenever I do volunteer work. I always take him along, even though it means I have to be constantly on the watch: I have to check his clothes, watch him wash his face and hands, make sure he goes to the washroom, and watch the food he eats. He likes to eat, but being overweight is hard on his heart. Therefore, I always insist that he follow those rules or details that are good for him.

Qiang brings laughter everywhere he goes. The volunteers told me that Qiang has improved so much, and that has helped me learn to appreciate him more.

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for the love and blessings they give him, and I want to say to him, "Mommy is proud of you!"

By Chen Yi-ling
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