

Tzu Chi Volunteers in Chile

Written by Zeng Duo-wen
Friday, 07 January 2011 17:49



It has been a few months since a powerful earthquake in February rocked the South American country of Chile. Chile is doing its best to emerge from the destruction, assisted in part by a small contingent of newly minted Tzu Chi volunteers. These volunteers, all of Chinese descent, remain active in the country even though the urgent need for their services has now subsided. As seeds naturally sprout when planted in fertile soil, so these volunteers have sprouted in the aftermath of the disaster. Though small in number, they are taking root and reaching deep into the soil, giving rise to the hope that they will grow luxuriantly in the months and years ahead, inspire more people to join them, and form a larger force to promote Tzu Chi and Great Love among everyone they touch.

Under the gray misty sky of early morning, a few people gathered in front of their hotel. One by one, they were joined by figures emerging out of the fog. Males and females of various ages appeared and joined the growing group at the rendezvous point. Soon, there were several dozen people standing around, chatting amiably with one another. They had all come from Santiago, the capital and largest city of Chile.

The date of this gathering was May 29, 2010. Those gathered were Tzu Chi volunteers, and they were preparing to set out for Quirihue to hold a relief distribution and a free clinic for earthquake victims. The group repeated the act the following day in Lota, about 80 miles south of Quirihue. Over these two days, these dedicated volunteers delivered daily necessities to more than 3,700 households and treated about 400 patients.

This accomplishment was made even more significant and amazing given the small size of the Chinese community in Chile. How could Tzu Chi have pulled off this rather large-scale operation? Here is their story.



Two calls

About 1,200 people of Chinese descent live in Santiago, Chile, mostly families headed by entrepreneurs. The community, distributed among approximately 300 households, is loosely organized. On some major Chinese holidays, like Chinese New Year, the Mid-Autumn Festival, or the Dragon Boat Festival, some of them might gather for a feast. But for the most part, there are no significant organized activities on their collective calendar.

Doctor Yang Chuang-long (楊長龍) has lived in Chile for more than 20 years. He's an established ob/gyn in Santiago, and he's always been interested in doing things to help the less fortunate. His wife of six years, Li Ting-ting (李亭亭), is equally interested in helping the needy, and she joins her husband at every opportunity to lend a helping hand.

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For example, a few years ago Yang and his wife proposed to the Chinese community a drive to collect bedsheets for nursing homes, and another drive to collect Christmas toys for children's hospitals. They made phone calls to prospective supporters and took out ads in the Chinese community newspapers to promote their plans. However, despite the couple's efforts, these initiatives were greeted with only lukewarm reception.

The Chinese community in Santiago just did not seem to get excited about such things—that is, until February 27, 2010. On that day, a horrendously strong earthquake rocked the entire western seaboard of South America. The quake brought down buildings and claimed many lives. Following the earthquake, two key phone calls arrived, one from Argentina and one from Bolivia. It was these two phone calls that provided the impetus to finally spur the Chinese community into action.

The first telephone call came to Li Ting-ting from Zhu Wen-zhang (朱文章), a long-time family acquaintance whom she fondly called Uncle Zhu. He told Li that he would be visiting Chile with other Tzu Chi volunteers from Argentina to assess the damage inflicted by the big quake and to see what Tzu Chi could do to help. He invited Li and her husband, Dr. Yang, to join him and his group.

The couple jumped at the opportunity to serve. They began calling and urging their own friends to join the effort. Yang's sister, a community leader, also spread the word and helped recruit participants.

The second phone call came to a tire importer in Chile, Xie Zhen-xiang (谢振祥), whose nickname was "Little Bear." His call came from his mother in Bolivia. She informed him that her good friend Hong Liang-dai (洪良代) in Argentina would be traveling with a Tzu Chi delegation to assess the earthquake damage. She asked Xie to accompany Hong every step of the way.

Xie's family emigrated from Taiwan to Bolivia when he was just two years old. He went to the United States at 19 to attend college. After graduating, he went to Taiwan to learn Chinese, and finally returned to South America to start his own import and export business in Argentina. In September 2009, he moved his business to Chile. Little did he suspect that just five months later his world would be rocked by one of the biggest earthquakes in history.



More volunteers

A six-member Tzu Chi delegation from Argentina arrived in Chile on March 10. They immediately connected with Xie and with Dr. Yang and his wife, and then they started their eight-day fact-finding mission.

Xie took them to the severely damaged Octava Region to meet with local authorities. The face-to-face meetings led to mutual understanding, and with understanding came cooperation and assistance. As a result, Tzu Chi was able to move their relief goods through customs

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smoothly. They were also able to go deep into disaster zones to identify the type of assistance the earthquake victims needed most.

To recruit local volunteers for the upcoming relief mission, Tzu Chi volunteers held a reception at a Chinese school in Santiago. More than 40 people attended, including Yang Ya-hui (楊雅惠).

Born in Taiwan, Yang emigrated with her parents to South America when she was 12 years old. At the age of 21, she began co-managing with her parents her family's textile import and export business. Three years ago, she switched jobs and took over a food import and export business from an uncle. She has been doing quite well.

Despite her success, she doesn't socialize much, not even with the local Chinese population. But that day she did go with her mother to the Tzu Chi reception. She said afterwards, "For reasons unknown to me, I felt like working with the people I met at the reception and doing something with them." It wasn't long before she was fully involved in the Tzu Chi relief efforts.

She played an important role in the distributions. When the volunteers decided to move up the date of the distributions, they faced an immediate difficulty of getting enough goods in time. Yang called on food suppliers for help, and they responded enthusiastically. Volunteers were able to buy locally all the salt, sugar, flour, and powdered milk needed for the distributions—and at good prices.

The reception also yielded more new volunteers for Tzu Chi. These people actively took the Argentina group around to survey damage, plan the distributions, and purchase goods.

A new Tzu Chi office

Distributions were held in late March, following extensive preparatory work. The distributions focused on three of the hardest-hit areas: Cobquecura, Dichato, and Caleta de Tumbes. Food and blankets were handed out to 2,500 households. In addition to the volunteers from Argentina, volunteers from Brazil and Paraguay were also on hand to help.

Zhu Wen-zhang, Hong Liang-dai, and the others returned to Argentina after the distributions. But before they left, they said they would come back in May for a second round of humanitarian aid. They asked the local Tzu Chi group to scout for locations. Soon thereafter, Xie Zhen-xiang ("Little Bear"), Yang Ya-hui, and Dr. Yang and his wife began looking for suitable places for the next mission. They were further aided by Chen Xiu-quan (陳秀全) and his wife, Zhu Xiang-yun (朱香雲), a couple whom the others had met while volunteering for Tzu Chi.

One day riding in Xie's vehicle on the way back to Santiago from a trip to the disaster areas, the volunteers were chatting and exchanging their thoughts and experiences when Dr. Yang said, "We've already done quite a bit. It'd be a pity if we didn't get a Tzu Chi branch office established here." No sooner had he finished his sentence than Chen echoed his sentiment. All the others chimed in with agreement as well.

Hong Liang-dai, one of the volunteers from Argentina, was delighted when she learned about the group's wish to set up a Tzu Chi office in Chile. She immediately offered her help. In late

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May 2010, a temporary Tzu Chi location was opened, and the group voted for Xie to head it.

Hong said of Xie, “Though he gives a lot, he doesn’t show off, and he always puts himself last.” Yang Ya-hui added, “Little Bear always speaks slowly, and the way he talks to you makes you feel that he really respects your opinions and feelings. He makes people feel very comfortable.”

Xie smiled shyly when he heard the others praise him as a “really good person,” but he humbly waved the compliments aside. “I really can’t think of myself as a good person,” he said. “But I’ve learned much from the Tzu Chi volunteers. If you had asked me three months ago to volunteer for a week, I’d have told you in a heartbeat I had no time for that. But now, after meeting the other volunteers, many of whom are big-league entrepreneurs, I tell myself: If they can make the time to come down here, how can I, a mere small businessman, say that I don’t have time to do the same?”



Real commitment

With a new Tzu Chi office now open in Santiago, Xie and the others have grown into true Tzu Chi volunteers. Although their assistance originally started as merely “helping out,” their commitment has grown into a firm dedication to help the suffering and the needy.

Following up on the first mission, the group eagerly looked for suitable locales for the second round of humanitarian aid. Once the distribution venues had been chosen, the new volunteers started the planning and preparation in earnest. They procured daily necessities and medicines, recruited medical professionals for the free clinics, identified and notified aid recipients, recruited volunteers to help staff the events, and planned the logistics to support all those activities. In response to their call for help, 41 local Chinese people pitched in.

On May 29, a distribution and a free clinic were held in Quirihue; another distribution and free clinic took place in Lota on the next day. Both were large-scale projects, yet they were carried out methodically and orderly. Xie worked with visiting government officials and the press corps during the events; Dr. Yang oversaw the operation of the clinics; Chen Xiu-quan kept the people and goods flowing smoothly; and his wife, Zhu Xiang-yun, and her restaurant staff made lunch for the volunteers.

Many other volunteers handed out blankets, food, and plastic tarpaulins to recipients, bowing deeply each time and wishing the quake victims well. Wu Bing-huang (王炳光), 70, a retired businessman who has lived in Chile for 35 years, said regarding the two Tzu Chi distributions and free clinics, “We Chinese here are loving people, too. We do good deeds, things like raising funds to build temples. But we have never done anything in such a planned and methodical sort of way.”

Yang Ya-hui also commented on the events that the new Tzu Chi Chile branch had put together: “The last distributions in March felt different from this round of events. I was sort of a

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guest the last time, but this time I was among the hosts responsible for the whole thing.”

Xie feels that he has learned more than he has contributed. “I don’t have a way with words and I’m not good at socializing. I had no friends, even after having lived here for eight months. That has totally changed since I joined Tzu Chi. I’ve made many new friends and have even begun taking action to help others.”

He used a Spanish saying to describe what he was feeling: “Dime con quién andas, te diré quién eres.” The phrase means, “You are known by the company you keep.” He said, “I am willing to be in such company as Tzu Chi people because I want to be a good person like them.”

Good wishes like that became seeds of hope that led to the establishment of the Tzu Chi Chile branch, and the seeds are sprouting and spreading.

On June 5, Tzu Chi Chile took another step forward when the eight local volunteers visited a nursing home for cerebral palsy patients established by the Coanil Foundation. They donated 110 blankets, 50 bath towels, and 30 sets of toothpaste and toothbrushes to the residents.

Once the kindness in a person’s heart is inspired, a seed of goodness sprouts. Let us hope that these eight seeds of goodness in Chile will soon inspire more people to join them. Together they will work to help make our world an even better place for all.

Translated by Tang Yau-yang
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