

Cleaning Homes and Hearts

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Tuesday, 01 September 2009 00:00



Since the 1960s, aquaculture has flourished in the coastal townships of Linbian, Jiadong, and Donggang in Pingdong County, southwest Taiwan. While the industry has provided many locals with a livelihood, overextraction of groundwater to feed fish ponds has caused severe land subsidence, making this region one of the most frequently flooded areas in Taiwan.

When Typhoon Morakot hit Taiwan, Pingdong received more than 3,000 millimeters (114 inches) of precipitation in four days, breaking previous records and leaving around 30,000 people trapped in floodwaters. Linbian, with one third of its land area below sea level, was hit hard. Floodwaters reached one story high and didn't recede for three days and nights. Nearby townships were in similarly miserable conditions.

In response to the horrible floods, Tzu Chi volunteers sprang into action to help those affected. They used rafts and boats to deliver hot boxed meals, and after the floods subsided they immediately began helping typhoon victims clean up their mud-coated homes. Love surged after the disaster.

Ten days after Typhoon Morakot pounded Taiwan on August 7 and 8, 2009, Linbian Township in Pingdong County, southern Taiwan, was a picture painted in hues of gray: The cars, streets, and buildings were all coated gray by the muddy floodwaters. Even the sky was gray. Mounds of damaged furniture, electrical appliances, and garbage thrown out by typhoon victims clogged the streets, also covered in thick layers of mud. Everything as far as the eye could see seemed to tell people that Linbian, like a sick patient, was in dire need of help and attention.

As the sun beat down from high above, the air was filled with the stench of dead fish and the foul odor of rotten mud. Bulldozers, excavators, mobile pumps, and garbage trucks zigzagged the streets while marines in red T-shirts, camouflage pants, and rubber gloves and boots tirelessly shoveled mud into buckets.

Volunteer helpers from various religious or charity organizations marched on the same mud-covered roads. The marching lines thinned as the volunteers broke into smaller groups and went into the homes of victims to help clean up.

Fear no filth, mess, stench, or trouble



After the floods receded on August 13, Tzu Chi volunteers started to mobilize the general public to help victims clean up their flooded homes in Linbian and nearby Jiadong. The ranks of helpers, initially in the hundreds, reached several thousand. Some volunteers even traveled the length of Taiwan to help: They left their homes in northern Taiwan early in the morning, arrived

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in Pingdong near the southern tip of the island by mid-morning, put in a day of hard work, and went home in the evening.

To improve efficiency, volunteers worked in groups, one for each house, and they would not move on to the next house until the one at hand had been thoroughly cleaned. They have found a formula for a super-duper cleanup job: Fear no filth, mess, stench, or trouble.

On the first Saturday after the typhoon, more than 6,000 enthusiastic volunteers flocked to disaster areas. This seemingly large group of helpers, however, could only tackle a fraction of the workload because the vast devastation area was very muddy. The college students who went with the volunteers were stunned to see the enormity of the destruction on the streets: "Why is there still so much mud after so many days?" Volunteers explained that mud would not evaporate and could not be pumped away, so the only way to get rid of it was one shovelful at a time. And there hadn't been enough hands to do all that shoveling.

"This is stickier than sticky rice dough!" a volunteer said of the mud. In fact, the goo was so gummy and adhesive that it could grab your boots. One volunteer actually lost his footing and fell in the mud, so volunteers trod gingerly and looked out for each other.

They formed teams and spread out to cover the streets. The college students went door-to-door to let people know that they were there to help. Many townspeople took them up on their offer, so the students quickly got busy too.

Volunteers went to the home of 78-year-old Huang Yao-hua (黃耀華), who lived alone in a traditional Taiwanese house where floodwaters had risen to 1.2 meters (almost four feet) deep and had left behind a lot of mud everywhere. When she saw the volunteers, she cried and told them, "I was worried sick. Now you are here, I can breathe easier."

The mud in her backyard vegetable garden was more than a foot deep. It was very hard to move in that sticky sludge, but the volunteers plugged along, shoveled mud into buckets, and removed the mess from Huang's property.

Huang asked the volunteers to help clean up her sleeping quarters too. With nothing better to use, one volunteer took out her own new towel to scrub the bed spotlessly clean. Just as the bed was about done, the bedroom floor presented itself as the next spot that needed a cleanup, then the hall, and then the living room. The floodwaters had indeed left their mark on everything everywhere.

When the house was all cleaned up, the volunteers said goodbye and told her that if she needed any more help, she could just tell any volunteer she saw on the street. Huang's eyes welled with tears. A volunteer hugged her and said, "We are your family."

The volunteers had brought their own food and water. After lunch, they started looking for the next family to help.

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Mud, mud everywhere



Guanglin Village was the most seriously damaged place in Linbian. Chen Xiu-xiang (陈修祥), village head, said that the floodwaters at their worst had been two stories deep, and they had stood there for too long. Nine days after the disaster, the village still had no running water or electricity, communications were still out, and the mud in the village was at least half a story deep. More than 300 families had evacuated from the village to stay with friends or relatives elsewhere.

When we walked further down the road along the railway into the village, we saw a horrendous sight. We could only see what was not covered by the mud: the rooftops of buildings or the tops of cars.

Ms. Liang thanked the volunteers for removing the mud in the front of her home so she could reach her living room again. Though her house was still a mess, she could now see the light at the end of the tunnel. She said with a smile, “With everyone’s help and support, I believe tomorrow will be better.”

Qiangyuan Village was also severely flooded, and no vehicles could get in until August 14. Mr. Cai said that he and his family had been unable to get out of their house, they had no running water or electricity, and they faced an uncertain future that made them feel helpless and scared like never before. On the third day after the typhoon the water started to recede and Tzu Chi volunteers brought them hot meals which, he said, “smelled and tasted so very good.” Then the volunteers cleaned his house. Mr. Cai said that the helping hands at a time of despair delivered warmth that he would never forget.

To help without being a burden themselves, all volunteers brought everything—food and tools—that they needed for the day. They worked until about four o’clock, cleaned themselves up, changed into clean, dry clothes, and went home.

Granted, one volunteer working for about six hours a day can only clean a miniscule amount. However, when many individuals work together, they can do great things.

Love means reaching out to help



“I heard on my car radio about Tzu Chi’s need for volunteer cleaners for the typhoon disaster. When I got home, I immediately called its Pingdong branch office. Although their phone was busy from the morning to the afternoon, I just kept calling. I was really thrilled when my call

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finally went through.”

Cleaning up after a disaster could be exhausting, but 70-year-old Jian Wang Min (简王敏) believed that it was everybody’s business to help the victims. She even convinced some of her neighbors to join her in the cleanup work.

At 6:30 in the morning, volunteer Li Su Yue-mei (李素月梅) left her home in Fengshan with a broom, bucket, and shovel and went to Linbian, about 20 miles to the south, to help out. As a certified Tzu Chi commissioner, she is authorized to collect donations for the foundation. It touched her deeply that recently many of her donating members had waited at her front door early in the morning to donate money to help typhoon victims via Tzu Chi.

Zeng Qin-ying (曾勤盈), in her 70s, joined the cleanup effort three days in a row. She said, “It’s gotten me very tired, but I’m delighted to help out. I feel very sorry for the heavy losses the victims suffered.”

One college student remarked that he was touched to see so many elderly people, children, and women volunteering to help the residents under the hot sun.

Huang Jing-yin (黄静吟) of Donggang, about five miles northwest of Linbian, spent two days cleaning up her own flooded home. “But when I saw that the people in Linbian had suffered worse, I decided to come help them,” she said.

“Tzu Chi volunteers waded in to reach us on the second day, when the water was still pretty high,” Yang Wang (杨王) said, choked with emotion. After she had regained her composure, she continued, “The volunteers placed two meal boxes in a bucket so we could hoist them up to the third floor, where we were. When I touched those boxes, my tears just came gushing out.”

She was greatly moved and decided to turn her emotion into action. She said, “The ambulance couldn’t come in to get two sick elderly neighbors to the hospital, so I took them there in my shrimp truck. I also took some people out because they needed to go out of town.” She had learned from the volunteers that we should always reach out to help others whenever we can.

With their own brooms, buckets, or shovels, individuals could help clean up victims’ homes fairly nicely. However, they were less productive in larger-scale cleanup jobs. Therefore volunteer organizers in northern Taiwan appealed to Tzu Chi members to loan their earth-moving machinery, such as bulldozers, excavators and trucks, to the cleanup effort. People responded and shipped a lot of such machinery to the disaster areas, where volunteers were then able to clean up the streets as well.

Tzu Chi had been cleaning up in Pingdong County for eight consecutive days when it suspended the work so the county government could start on August 21 to repair the sewer system. As soon as the sewer system was repaired, volunteers resumed the cleanup work.

People in all parts of society, even foreign students, have participated in this gigantic,

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grassroots cleanup effort. May the spirit of Great Love be everlasting, and may the volunteers' efforts inspire compassion in more people.

By Tzu Chi documenting volunteers
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