

Books Across the Ocean

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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Soon after Chinese New Year at the Tzu Chi Great Love Preschool and Kindergarten in Monrovia, a suburb of Los Angeles, children took presents to school every day for several days. Some went with storybooks, others with stuffed toys or new school supplies. They couldn't wait to show their friends what they had brought—books and toys they had grown up with, things they had loved so much but had outgrown. Their affection for these things was written all over their faces.

These children were among the students at 20 Tzu Chi Academies across the United States supporting the “Send Love to South Africa” project.

In South Africa, there are many remote localities where schools do not have enough funds to buy books. Although government mobile libraries regularly call on schools, they do so but once a semester, far less than the students need. Therefore, many schoolchildren have no books to read except for their textbooks. In 2004 Tzu Chi volunteers in the United States started the annual “Send Love to South Africa” program that collects gently used books, toys, and new school supplies for needy students in South Africa.

This was the first year in which the Tzu Chi Great Love Preschool and Kindergarten in Monrovia participated in the program.

Shared joy is sweeter



One day at school the kindergarteners inspected, and fixed up if necessary, all collected items to make sure that they were in the best shape possible before shipping them off.

A teacher told the youngsters to “put books over there and toys in those boxes.” After the items had been sorted out, some students examined them. They were to check each page of a book for anything that might need repair or touching up, such as a loose or torn page. “Only after everything checks out can you put your Tzu Chi sticker on it,” an adult volunteer reminded the examiners. “Remember to keep the desks and tables nice and neat.” By mindfully putting the books and toys in order, the students showed respect for their future recipients.

“Doctor, I need help!” A child took a book to the repair table and handed it to one of the child examiners, who quickly but carefully repaired it to its most presentable form. A couple of adult volunteers were on hand in case the doctors themselves needed help.

“Now please put your gifts in the correct boxes, gently,” a volunteer told the children. The children counted as they put things into the boxes: “29, 30, 31, 32....” They did all this lovingly, thinking of how happy the children in South Africa would be when they received them.

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Each box was labeled as one of seven categories of books, stuffed toys, school supplies, or some combination. Proper boxing and labeling would help make it easier to distribute the items in South Africa quickly and correctly.

Finally, all the items were boxed up. Everybody cheered. "Yeah! Mission accomplished. Roll them out!" Though children still loved the things they had boxed up, they didn't seem reluctant to give them away. They knew that the children in South Africa would be very happy because of their generosity, and the gifts would be well taken care of by their new owners too.

Send them out

In 2009, after six months of hard work, volunteers and students at the 20 U.S. Tzu Chi schools had collected many used books, stuffed toys, and new school supplies for the program. About 4,500 students from those schools wrote cards to go with the shipments to their South African contemporaries, across the ocean halfway around the world.

In addition to what the students, like those at the Monrovia kindergarten, had done to get the gifts ready, more than a hundred adult volunteers in the Los Angeles area also helped. They got the 838 boxes of gifts that had come from all over the western United States ready, and they loaded them into a 20-foot cargo container. A group of volunteers in New Jersey similarly loaded the boxes gathered from the eastern part of the country into another container.

In total, 71,261 used books, 34,877 stationery articles, and 6,365 toys went into these two containers. In comparison, the program sent out 11,000 books in 2005. The combined efforts of the students and volunteers made possible the shipments of love, which set out by sea from Los Angeles in mid February and from New Jersey in late April 2009. The first shipment reached South Africa on April 7, just before winter set in, and the second shipment arrived on June 7.

Much needed and appreciated



Dr. Mathole Motshekga Primary School is located in a predominantly Zulu suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa. More than a thousand students take their lessons in make-shift classrooms. Tzu Chi volunteers have been working with the school for some time.

Early in 2009, the school got a gift of an empty cargo container, which the school decided to use as its library. Just as school officials were scratching their heads, wondering how to find books for the empty library shelves, Tzu Chi volunteers came through with the good news that two containers of books and other gifts were en route.

Nearly two months later, the school received this year's allotment of more than 300 books from the "Send Love to South Africa" program. With those "new" books, the library will surely become

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a new magnet on campus. Even while helping to move the new books, many students sat down on the floor and started reading intently.

Similar scenes can also be seen at elementary schools in Ladysmith, Durban, and Cape Town, which also received gifts from the program. As more and more students read them, the books inevitably become more aged and worn, but the lives and futures of their readers might be better as a result.

By Li Qiong-xun and Lu Yue-xia
Translated by Tang Yau-yang
Photographs by Deng Leng-sheng