

How Can We Not Love Our Children?

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Monday, 25 April 2005 00:00

South African teachers and students boarded a plane in Johannesburg, South Africa, and flew across the Indian Ocean, over Madagascar and many little islands, and then changed planes in Hong Kong for Taiwan. "Going to Taiwan" had seemed quite unthinkable to them. This was the first time they had ever gone to Johannesburg, flown on a plane, left South Africa, seen the ocean, and visited Master Cheng Yen in person. These little children sang and danced and won our love. Even the teachers were shaken by what they witnessed. They promised that they would never stop teaching their children.



October meant the arrival of summer in South Africa in the Southern Hemisphere. At noon, the golden sunlight completely covered the land. People went about their business as usual, but in the town office of Ladysmith, Ngema Noxolo kept looking out of the window. The ten-year-old girl had curly hair, shiny black skin, and bright, attractive eyes.

This was her big day, because her father had promised to come and help her apply for her passport to Taiwan. She had no idea where Taiwan was, but she was quite clear that Tzu Chi was in Taiwan. The foundation had helped build a school with a roof and four walls in her hometown and had even given her books and pencils. She really wanted to go to Taiwan so she could see Master Cheng Yen and thank all the good Tzu Chi people who had given her so much.

Time kept ticking by and an hour passed, but her father still hadn't shown up. Her excitement was replaced by anxiety. Then she saw Buthelez Jabulani, her school principal. Ngema hugged the principal tightly and choked out through her tears, "I... I want to go to Taiwan..."

Seeing the tearful face in his embrace, Jabulani couldn't say a word. He understood the child's desire, because he himself had the same wish. Ngema's wish was simple, but Jabulani had experienced many things in his life and had much deeper expectations. "Ten years! It hasn't been easy to come this far." He couldn't control his emotion and tears filled his eyes.

Ten classrooms

Jabulani would never forget 1994, when Nelson Mandela won the presidential election and the blacks, who made up over 70 percent of the total population, finally achieved their own political rights. Apartheid finally disappeared into history.



Apartheid had divided South Africans into four classes: the whites were on the top, then the Asians, the colored, and finally the blacks. When Mandela became president, he smashed those racial divisions, and he also established new schools and new clinics. This was indeed a turning point for the country.

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Jabulani was appointed to Amankamakazana CP School in a little village near Ladysmith in 1996. This was a school for Zulu children, but it had no classrooms. The word "Zulu" means "heaven," but Jabulani felt very strange as he viewed the barren plain.

To help their children receive an education, village residents had worked very hard to raise money out of their meager incomes to build this simple school. But sun, rain and wind had ravaged the school: the roof was gone and only two walls were left.

Jabulani pleaded with government officials for help, but their promises failed one after the other. Not even private donations could be found. The principal became so depressed that he wanted to be transferred elsewhere. "Even though we aren't discriminated against anymore, the social gaps that lasted for hundreds of years can't be changed right away," Jabulani said of the cruel reality.

The whole nation was waiting to be reborn after the elections. The government might have determination, but time was needed. The area around Ladysmith lacked any resources, so it was impossible to find prosperity in a short time.

Fortunately, God hadn't forgotten these children. A group of Tzu Chi volunteers came to them. They gave generously, and they also solicited money from local Chinese and Taiwanese businessmen. Finally, the children had a ten-classroom school with roofs and brick walls.

This was the first Tzu Chi school in South Africa. A few years later, six more elementary schools and a kindergarten were built. Now 2,700 Zulu children study in over 50 classrooms built by the foundation.

From disappointment to joy, from nothing to everything, Jabulani had a lot to ponder. He felt that he had seen the future because of Tzu Chi, and he wanted to know more about this organization. The closer he came to it, the more he came to love it.

An incredible journey

Jabulani's dream about visiting Taiwan finally came true. And he could take the children along too!

Actually, Tzu Chi volunteers in South Africa had already considered inviting the teachers and students to Tzu Chi headquarters in Taiwan. They believed the teachers could understand Tzu Chi better and join the volunteers in creating a better learning environment for the students. The Tzu Chi world education fair to be held in Taiwan in October 2004 was a perfect opportunity.



The decision astonished the children. In their little village, many people had problems feeding

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themselves. They already felt very fortunate to go to school in their village, so going to Taiwan was beyond imagination! They knew very well that if they missed this chance, they might never get another. Even Jabulani said, "This was the first time I could cross half the globe and go to Taiwan."

However, there were so many children from seven schools, so who should go?

The Tzu Chi First Elementary School and the Second Elementary School were not so remotely located, so it was more convenient to pick up the children; furthermore, the teachers were also willing to go along. Thus, students from the second to the fourth grades from these two schools were chosen to go. The students also had a responsibility: they had to share with the others what they had heard and seen in Taiwan.

According to South African law, minors need their birth certificates and their parents' signatures to apply for passports to leave the country. When the volunteers were preparing all the required documents, problems started to surface: some children didn't even have birth certificates.

It is estimated that a quarter of adults in KwaZulu-Natal Province, where Ladysmith is located, are illiterate. Most of them work as laborers or maids. Some parents are not aware that they should apply for birth certificates for their children, or they feel that it is unnecessary.

Volunteer Fang Lung-sheng pointed out that some children had to give up the chance of going to Taiwan because their parents had died and so they had no chance to apply for birth certificates. In the end, 16 fortunate children--13 girls and 3 boys from 8 to 13 years old--were chosen.

In the end, Ngema's father never showed up. Jabulani and Tzu Chi volunteers traveled a long distance with the young girl to find her parents and have them sign their names. Then, the volunteers rushed the documents to Johannesburg, 360 kilometers [223 miles] from Ladysmith, so Ngema was able to join the others at the last moment and travel to Taiwan.



The first time

"This was the first time I ever flew on a plane. It was like sitting on a bus for the blacks. We flew to the sky and into the clouds. I saw the sea. There was something in the sea that looked like a fish, but I wasn't sure if it was a fish." Zanele excitedly wrote about her first trip.

"We caught the plane in Johannesburg and flew across the Indian Ocean, over Madagascar and many small islands. We landed in Hong Kong and then came to Taipei. This is the first time, and perhaps my last time, that I have been to Taiwan. I am very happy." Ten-year-old Lungelo wrote in great detail about the new world she saw.

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Volunteer Ho Tang-hsing had all kinds of emotions when he saw the happiness and curiosity on the children's faces. He realized that this trip was not only exciting, but it also had many firsts for the children--the first time they had gone to Ladysmith, the first time they had traveled to Johannesburg (the capital of South Africa), the first time they had flown on a plane, the first time they had left the country, and the first time they had seen the sea.

On the train to the Tzu Chi headquarters in Hualien, the children saw the ocean in close proximity for the first time, and their tiny faces were glued to the windows. They talked about it with each other in their Zulu language. When asked how they felt about seeing the ocean, they all replied with big smiles.

Even the five South African teachers had a lot of questions. "Is this your farm?" "Is that rice in that field?" Land in South Africa is very spread out, so the teachers were very curious about the little fields and the farmhouses in Taiwan.

Principal Hlongwane Nhlanhla of Mthandi CP School said, "The trip opened our eyes and we could see the outside world!" He wasn't exaggerating. Teachers and principals have a good social status in South Africa and have more chances to see the outside world, but the gaps caused by apartheid after such a long time cannot be easily erased.

After all these "firsts," Hualien was full of wonder for the visitors. For instance, there was a class about children around the world. During a video presentation, the students wept when they learned that many children in the world had lost their families or were starving. "I thought I was the most unfortunate person," said one student through her tears, "but now I know that there are others who are less fortunate than me."

What the children looked forward to most was meeting Master Cheng Yen in person. On the first day when they saw a nun welcoming them, the excited children believed that she was the Master. However, they noticed something was wrong and whispered to the volunteers next to them, "Why does she look different from the picture?"

When they finally saw the real Master Cheng Yen, all the students smiled and ran to hug her.

Mandarin and Taiwanese

These South African children and teachers performed and sang songs in the Mandarin and Taiwanese dialects. Tobes and Lungelo won thunderous applause for their performance in Taiwanese.

How did these children learn these languages? Volunteer Ho Tang-hsing recalled that when they first went to the village, the children were very shy and stayed away from them. After some time, the children came to know the volunteers better and began to trust them. The volunteers then taught them some Taiwanese songs. The children were very sensitive to music, and so they naturally memorized the songs very easily. The volunteers spent a long time teaching the children. They visited the children every week and showed that they cared about their lives.

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