

Taitung, Taiwan: 1961

Taitung, Taiwan: 1961. The savage sun rages down upon the bare backs of men tending to the fields. Their skin scorched red by its ravaging rays, but there is no time to halt. Work means Life and Life must be lived. Not far away on those very fields, a weary woman lays incarcerated by the earth, pulse pounding convulsions rack her body, rags drenched in the adversity of her own sweat and blood. And just as her last breath is taken from her, her newborn child breathes its first.

It was from this dire image that St. Mary's Hospital was born. Horrified by the sight of women bearing babies in the fields and the obscene sanitary conditions, Swiss fathers and sisters in Taitung began to raise money abroad in order to build St. Mary's as a center for obstetrics. They soon introduced physicians and much-needed medical equipment to Taiwan –they even trained local nurses to practice as "fake nurses" without certificates due



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to a shortage of professionals. This past summer, I found myself volunteering at the place now affectionately known as "Taiwan's Biggest Little Hospital." Although this tiny hospital only has 29 hospital beds, its health promotion and medical outreach programs permeate deeply throughout the county, helping the poorest and most disenfranchised of minorities in Taiwan every year. But why am I talking about something which seems so utterly remote from our lives? Am I not supposed to be blogging about my experiences as a Schulich Leader in second year university at UBC?

From translating the hospital website into English so that it was more accessible to the international community, to dressing the bedsores of patients living in houses made of little more than a few pieces of corrugated metal –I experienced a world quite unlike anything I

had ever known before. The very words of my second year microbiology and immunology text were brought to life. Elderly aborigines, whose sons and daughters had left for big cities in search of jobs, were left alone, unable to take care of themselves. Often these dear people would go for days without eating a proper meal. As a result, their immune systems waned, making them vulnerable to a vast array of pathogens and health issues which had they had proper nutrition, would be completely preventable. However, with the hospital meal delivery program, those in need are now able to receive nutritious, custom-made meals on a daily-basis. Their health has improved exponentially and along with it, their spirits have soared.

On one occasion, I was accompanying the nurses on their daily rounds to provide homecare. One of their patients that day was an elderly gentleman whom I had helped to feed and take care of the previous year. This elderly gentleman had suffered from a severe case of gout, so I was surprised to see that he had come out of his house and was sitting quietly on a rickety old chair. When I held his gnarled hands in mine, I was overjoyed to find that his joints were not inflamed as they had once been. I asked him "Did you turn 86 years old this year, Grandfather?" to which he replied quietly "Then you must be 19." A faint smile spread across his sweet, wrinkled old face and it was at this moment that I became fully aware that my actions had made a far greater impact than I had ever suspected –he had remembered me, after all this time. I was very touched. To put things simply, I learned so much. I was happy, humbled and honored to have shared the lives of all of the amazing people whom I had worked with and to have been able to touch their lives in return.

After returning to university this year, I knew that it was important for me to revive the charitable organization that my friend and I began during high school. Our organization, which is called Hope for Happiness is dedicated towards promoting awareness about human rights issues and taking action against poverty on a local and international scale. This past fall, I led a team in executing a successful fundraising event from afar with the help of a good friend back in Ontario. Proceeds from this event will help to fund our upcoming project which surrounds combating malnutrition through sustainable growing practices. Currently, we are planning our next fundraising and awareness event.

So to answer my original question, I have written about this instead of focusing on the details of my semester because my experience this summer has reminded me of something very important, something that I want to share with students, parents and educators alike. In a world where the value of education has become increasingly quantifiable solely by your GPA or the monetary cost of "purchasing" a degree, my experience in Taiwan has reminded me that the true value of education lies not in the diploma which hangs framed in your office, nor in your perfect transcript –but in all of the potential it has given you to create change, stand up for what is right and contribute to the society in which you live