

# The End of Strife

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The Project Yangon team and orphanage children after a health education lesson

**TRANSLATED INTO** English, *Yangon* means “the end of strife”. However, for many of the villagers in Shwe Pyi Thar, a small township in the city of Yangon, life is a constant struggle to move on from their devastating past. A large number of them had been relocated there from elsewhere in the city, due to a fire that had wrecked their houses years ago. They arrived at the township with virtually nothing but their indomitable fighting spirit, and community bonds held them together to rebuild their homes from scratch.

This year, Project Yangon, comprising 14 first and second year students from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSoM), returned once again to Yangon for its third official Overseas Community Involvement Programme trip. This trip, from 22 May to 3 June, marked its inaugural collaboration with Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) Yangon to serve the villagers in Shwe Pyi Thar.

While many in Singapore are blessed with convenient access to healthcare such as neighbourhood family clinics, this is definitely not the case for the villagers of Shwe Pyi Thar. Their main option of obtaining medical care is going to the YMCA clinic (located in the village monastery), which is open for a few hours every Thursday, while dental care is simply a luxury out of reach. Living below the poverty line, many cannot afford a healthy lifestyle, resulting in the prevalence of medical conditions such as hypertension and diabetes in their community. Thus, Project Yangon hopes to

provide help to these villagers by improving their standards of health.

## Our journey so far

Project Yangon was started four years ago by a group of Year 2 students from YLLSoM. In 2011, working with Myanmar Vision International, they embarked on their first overseas trip and visited various orphanages in Yangon to conduct health education and health clinics. Last year, a new group of first and second year medical students continued where their seniors left off, going on a second trip to conduct another round of health education and health clinics in the same orphanages, with the help of Dr Tan Teck Hong, a GP in Singapore. In the latest trip, we decided to focus our efforts on the village of Shwe Pyi Thar, as well as follow up on the orphanages that our seniors had visited.

Our team strongly believes in health education, which we feel is a more sustainable and useful upstream measure to ensuring good health. We tried to include bits of health education in all our activities, even door-to-door visits and health clinics, where health messages were pitched at different levels and taught to children and adults alike. Besides engaging in health education, our team also aimed to address immediate needs, such as providing medicines through clinics and funding the building of a well for the villagers to obtain clean water.

## Getting to know the people

When we first arrived at Shwe Pyi Thar, we embarked on door-to-door visits with the primary purpose of befriending the villagers and gaining a better understanding of their lives. In their homes, we held simple health education lessons in small groups, teaching them basic hygiene practices and also educating them on topics such as the harmful effects of smoking and chewing betel nuts. Villagers' health data was also collected from these visits so that we could better comprehend their needs.

We were really touched by the camaraderie and the hospitality of the villagers, who were very supportive of our efforts in the area, readily opening their homes to us and offering us their time. Their community spirit also gave us a glimpse of the great potential for the spreading of health messages within the community and subsequent community monitoring of health practices. In one house we visited, when a middle-aged man under-reported his alcohol consumption, the women called his bluff, waving their hands and exclaiming, "Nonsense! More than that!" Everyone present had a good laugh, including the man himself, who conceded that he should drink less. When we suggested that the women could help check on him, they jokingly replied that they would tie him to a chair if he imbibed too much.

## Taking ownership of health

During our door-to-door visits, our team also invited villagers who wanted to take an active role in spreading health messages to join our Health Ambassador programme. This scheme taps into local capabilities by equipping villagers with a deeper understanding of health topics so they could correct general misconceptions and spread accurate messages regarding health in their community. Its content was tailored to focus on issues which, based on our home visits, were of greatest relevance and interest to them.

By facilitating the sharing of effective health solutions, our programme also informed the community which of their assets they could utilise to better their health. Next year, we hope to better understand the source of the community's health problems, by discussing the social and physical barriers to good health with the villagers.

## Making a measurable difference

After visiting about 80 households, our team operated a health clinic over three days, with the kind help of five locals – four volunteer doctors and a pharmacist. About 400 villagers were screened and given medication. In addition, we sponsored cataract surgeries for 21 villagers and provided spectacles for another 50, with complimentary services from a local ophthalmologist. Before the end of our trip, we saw the contented faces of villagers wearing sunglasses after

their cataract operations. While the efficiency of our medical assistance was impressive, it highlighted the villagers' lack of access to such services had we not made the trip there.

In the years to come, we hope to establish ways to link the villagers back to their healthcare system, to promote better management of chronic diseases and better referral of patients who require secondary care.

## Interacting with the young ones

Our team held health education sessions in the village school, as well as in several orphanages such as YMCA Hneit Aw Sar Orphanage, teaching more than 200 school children about personal hygiene, diet, eye care and first aid. The children's enthusiasm and welcoming gestures truly transcended language barriers. The same applied for the spontaneous play we had with children from White Dove Orphanage and Immanuel Orphanage, in which we expressed more than the limited Burmese we could speak, and interpreted more words of love from the young ones than we could understand.

What struck us was that they remembered us from our recce trip last December and the previous trip in May 2013 – it seems that continuity does make a difference. We were also deeply moved by how generous the children were in expressing their appreciation of our presence. Like many of her friends, 8-year-old Ma Thi Da gave one of her prized possessions, a beaded bracelet, to a member of Project Yangon. This priceless gift showed that no matter how little one has, one can still have a sharing heart.

## Our commitment to the people

Project Yangon's next official trip will be in May next year, during which we plan to return to Shwe Pyi Thar. To better assess their changing needs, we will be conducting a recce trip this December. While concrete plans have not been finalised, we wish to strengthen our health education efforts for the villagers to further our goal of empowering them.

We are currently looking for mentors, doctors and translators for our trip in May 2015. Volunteers can be expected to play a huge role in the planning and execution of the project. Feel free to check out our website at <http://projectyangon.wordpress.com>. If you are interested in contributing, please contact Kenneth at [projectyangon2015@gmail.com](mailto:projectyangon2015@gmail.com). ■



*Lee Voon (right), Sandra and Kenneth are currently Year 2 medical students studying at YLLSoM. They joined Project Yangon in 2013, and went for their most recent volunteer trip from May to June this year.*

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