NORTHLIGHT SCHOOL STUDENTS TELL STORIES TO CHILDREN WITH CHRONIC DISEASES
By Chen Qiuhua

Northlight School principal Chua-Lim Yen Ching said when interviewed that "Our students have always been on the receiving end. It is their turn to help others. Even though they had failed in their examinations before, they are at least able-bodied and capable of helping others."

Students nowadays generally do not enjoy tuition. However, sisters Zeng Jingting, 19, and Zeng Jingwen, 16, are exceptions. And now, they have one more reason to like tuition as they will get the opportunity to listen to stories told by their "sisters and brothers" from Northlight School.

The siblings developed an extremely rare illness called Aromatic L-Amino Acid Decarboxylase Deficiency (AADC) at a young age. There are currently only around 30 patients with this condition in the world. Patients get tired very easily and their mobility, speaking and learning abilities are also affected.

Four years ago, the two sisters joined a free tuition programme offered by Club Rainbow where they receive one-to-one tuition from volunteers at the Northlight School canteen every Saturday. There are around 60 other children suffering from chronic diseases in the programme.

After observing the tuition classes, a group of students from Northlight School came up with an idea of showing the learners more care and love. They decided to set up a reading corner for the children and read stories to them so that they will be able to enjoy books and stories while waiting for their parents to pick them up.

Northlight School takes in students who have failed their PSLE. Many of them are from poor and broken families. Therefore, the students have always received special care from society, such as free emergency transport services from taxi operators.

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NUS student collected book donations for Northlight School

In their excitement to launch their plan, the students at Northlight School discovered that they lacked the most important thing - books. After learning about this, Xie Xiaoyun, 30, a student from the NUS Faculty of Law, launched a book donation drive.
on campus in cooperation with the NUS National Police Cadet Corps. They collected more than 500 books within four days and delivered them to Northlight School on Children's Day.

This collection of more than 500 books, now sitting neatly in a cupboard in the Northlight School canteen, is available for the children of Club Rainbow to borrow and read.

Xiaoyun explained that the initiative was actually the project work of an elective module she took. She could have chosen to write a thesis to complete the module but she felt that it would be more meaningful to help others in the course of completing her course.

Principal Chua-Lim Yen Ching observed that students who initially did not like to read started to cultivate the habit of reading after they began reading stories to children.

On the day of the interview, Syafir (16), Rohana (18), and Mastuna (16), who jointly started the programme, were all holding large English picture books in their hands and reading stories to children sitting on the floor. Their storytelling sessions were occasionally accompanied by dramatic gestures. At the end of the stories, the story tellers would also ask questions and award small tokens to those who answered correctly to ensure that the children understood what they had heard.

It was later discovered that they spent a whole week practising for this "performance".

Rohana said "This was our first time telling stories to children. We were a bit nervous and we stayed back after school every day to practise. We even thought up expressions and gestures that we could use to accompany the story-telling in order to make it livelier. We were very happy to see the cute expressions on the faces of the children and hear their laughter. This is our last year in school. We have always been on the receiving end from others in the past. Therefore, we really hope to do something meaningful for others before we graduate."

Of course, the programme would not end with their graduation. They have already arranged for other students to come and observe their story-telling in order to take over from them in the future.

The significant effort invested by these students at Northlight School has not gone to waste. Zeng Jingting and Zeng Jingwen were seen laughing loudly while listening to the stories. Their mother said that the sisters love to go for tuition because the volunteers are very caring and able to provide them with one-to-one tuition, and it is even better now with the story-telling sessions.
She explained that her two daughters have relatively weak reading skills. It requires a huge amount of effort for them to read on their own. Therefore, they love to listen to stories told by others. She used to put her daughters in strollers or wheelchairs and bring them to community libraries for story-telling sessions in the past.

"However, they are now 'over-age' and therefore cannot attend the story-telling sessions at libraries anymore. They were very excited after learning that they would be able to listen to stories after tuition. "

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