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The Amity Foundation is an independent Chinese voluntary organisation. It was created in 1985 on the initiative of Chinese Christians. It has worked to promote education, social services, health, and rural development in the underdeveloped areas of China. Amity’s work is grounded in the belief that all human beings share the same dignity. Abiding by the principle of mutual respect in faith, Amity builds friendship with both Christians and non-Christians in China and abroad. In this way, Amity contributes to China’s social development and openness to the outside world. It makes Christian involvement and participation in meeting the needs of society more widely known to the Chinese people and serves as a channel for people-to-people contact and the ecumenical sharing of resources. Helping to develop civil society in China is one of the key aims of its work.

The Amity Foundation has about 50 full-time staffers at its Nanjing headquarters. Hundreds of volunteers work with Amity all over China. The foundation receives funds from partners abroad as well as in Hong Kong and mainland China.
During the first few years of her life, Zhu Yue (picture below) was unable to talk with her parents. When she was hungry or thirsty she pointed at her mouth. Zhu Yue is deaf and, when she was still a toddler, interaction with her mother was confined to a few gestures because she didn’t learn any language before she went to school.

In China, most deaf children are not expected to learn any language during the first years of their lives. When a deaf student finally enters first grade, he or she starts learning to produce Chinese sounds - a long and painful process for somebody who can’t hear. It may take years before a simple conversation is possible.

Fortunately, unlike most other deaf girls in China, Zhu Yue was able to communicate with her family and friends much earlier than most. This is because she entered one of Amity’s SigAm project schools where sign language is taught along with Chinese right from the start. The acquisition of sign language has allowed her to quickly enter meaningful conversations and engage in common social interaction, not least with her mother, who is now learning sign language at her daughter’s school herself.

Teaching sign language as a native language to deaf children along with a second language (in this case, Chinese) is a fairly new method, which was introduced to several schools in China a lot earlier than to schools in most European countries. Thanks to my colleague Wu An An, director of Amity’s Social Welfare Division, a number of Norwegian experts on bilingual deaf education were invited to China to assist with setting up the bilingual program, SigAm. When I took part in last year’s SigAm conference in Suzhou, I was greatly impressed how Wu An An and her staff had managed over the last few years to literally gather throngs of experts, researchers, NGO staff, school teachers and government officials from China, Norway and several other countries to make the bilingual approach better known in China and eventually influence policies in a positive way.

Because of these efforts, Zhu Yue’s positive experiences are now shared by many children and young adults who have taken part in recent projects designed to help disabled people cope with their special condition. That something is done for them is part of a greater effort in China to integrate marginalized people. The government has announced it will provide significantly better social services in the years to come. An official roadmap toward creating a welfare state in China within 40 years was recently published by a team of Chinese experts. It identifies medical care and the creation of a reliable pension system for old people as two of the main targets.

However, many other areas have yet to receive more attention. There are still too many deaf and/or blind children who never go school. Especially in the countryside, disabled children are facing a series of difficulties: Disabilities are sometimes not discovered or misdiagnosed; living conditions are often not adapted to the special needs of disabled children; local institutions are not equipped with the right material and educational methods to support disabled children.

Setting high standards in social welfare and bringing in new ideas from abroad have always been high on the agenda of Amity’s Social Welfare Division. The SigAm project is just one example for this. Wu An An and her team have spent a lot of effort on introducing cutting-edge educational methods for children with special needs to many of the relevant institutions, both in the cities and, even more so, in the countryside. Many new methods have been replicated in several places around the country, and Amity’s work in this area has even influenced policy decisions. I hope this issue will give you a glimpse of what Amity is doing in the field.

Best,
Beate Engelen

www.amityfoundation.org
Last month, our school started a trial class in which deaf students are taught based on the bilingual method. Since then, time has gone by in a flash. It seems like yesterday that the deaf teacher Lei Ming and I prepared the classroom during summer vacation. By now, our students can already use sign language when they communicate with teachers and parents to express their everyday needs, they can interact on a simple level with their classmates and they can tell the story of “little monkey coming down from the mountain” in a vivid, imaginative and orderly way. They are now lively and carefree in their behavior and love to use sign language. In just a short period of time, the bilingual experimental class has given me great satisfaction.

I remember the first day at school when parents were bringing in their children, skeptically listening to the explanations of Mr. Wang, the school principle, who talked about bilingual deaf education. Many times the parents would ask: “Does my child learn to speak if sign language is taught as the first language?” “Now that the child is taught bilingually, wasn’t it a waste of time that my child had oral training before?”

Repeatedly, we explained that we do not just focus on the children's ability to speak, but more importantly to develop their cognitive skills, raise their capacity to communicate and strengthen their ability to express themselves. We tried to make it clear that the children would not just do exercises in which they would parrot the teacher's input and mechanically repeat sounds. Instead, by using a bilingual approach we would respect the special situation of deaf children and their physiological and psychological development.

I am extremely happy that the parents are really behind us. They even agreed to learn sign language themselves and are now willing to use it in conversations with their children. This particular fact made our teach-
ing efforts a lot easier than before. Because of this, we changed the time when parents receive sign language training from once a week to every day at 3:30 pm. I tell the parents during the training what the children learn each day, so they can give the students an opportunity to effectively repeat what they have learned. Together with the parents, we achieve good educational results.

Getting books on sign language is something the parents and grandparents are very interested in. There was one grandfather who personally went to the Xinhua bookstore to buy a book on sign language. He pointed out to me that there are different editions from different publishers. In the past, he said, he didn't allow his granddaughter Zhu Yanyu to use sign language because he wanted her to improve her oral skills. But when he read an introduction to sign language he realized that “sign language is a distinct and independent language.” So why shouldn't he let his granddaughter learn it? He now has some hope for her future. I was quite pleased to realize that the parents and grandparents not only learned basic sign language but also read books on the theory of sign language. It is the bilingual approach which gives them hope.

Zhu Yanyu, the granddaughter, is now the fastest learner in the bilingual class. In the past, she attended the speech training classes at our school. She has a 90dB hearing impairment, meaning that she couldn't hear any sound lower than 90dB. Thus speech training is far from ideal for somebody like her. If teachers and parents keep such children from using sign language, they actually deprive them of any communication experience. I heard her parents say that her health isn't good because she has a natural deficiency which keeps her from realizing when she is hungry. This is why she is very thin. A doctor even told the parents that their daughter might live for no more than a few years.

However, her cognitive skills are normal. Since she started attending our bilingual class, she has liked to communicate, she has been able to and fond of using sign language, she has been able to follow the class and she can finally answer questions by using her hands. She has gained praise and respect from the teachers and her classmates. In the meantime, her mental and emotional situation has improved. Even though she doesn't eat much during lunch, she really wants to eat. Food put into her bowl she will finish up. And when she happens to have difficulties eating all, her friends will cheer her on. During storytelling class, when the teacher Lei Ming teaches “the little monkey coming down from the mountain”, she listens with great interest. She puts a lot of emotions into retelling the story in class. In the evening, she retells the story in front of her grandfather and grandmother. She has become quite a different person.

During this first month, I have watched Zhu Yuyan making constant progress. I really hope that every month I will see more children making such progress. I hope that they can walk out of the shadows of oral training failure and become successful through bilingual training. The children, the parents and grandparents, Lei Ming and me, we all work hard towards this end!
Under a cluster of bamboo trees, Xiao Qiang is talking with his friend Lin Lin, enjoying the soft wafts of breeze from the rice fields. They both sit on their own special seats—two homemade wheelchairs. Pieces of wood are attached to the sides of these bamboo wheelchairs, which also have two small wheels and are pretty comfortable.

While this charming village scene pleases some of the visitors, others feel uncomfortable at the sight of such ‘shabby’ wheelchairs. “These NGOs always claim they assist people in need, but still, these children don’t have real wheelchairs!” said Mr. Zhou, the vice director of Nanjing Orphanage, Jiangsu Province. People were not only divided over the need for better wheelchairs but also over the question what is best for the children’s development.

Xiao Qiang is a child with cerebral palsy. He is 10 years old and has been foster-cared by his present family for seven years. When he first came to this family, he had little control over his limbs and head; he could not turn his body, let alone sit and walk. His parents love the child very much, especially his mother. She accompanies Xiao Qiang to all the rehabilitation trainings and Xiao Qiang is strongly attached to her. The mother proudly explains that only two months into his foster care, he was already able to sit with assistance, control his head and feet, grab things and use simple words to communicate. Now his achievement is even greater: He can play with toys, eat on his own and use rich language to communicate. His mother went on telling the stories about her child growing up, how he plays with other children in the village, how he tells other children about the cartoons he has seen, how he plays tricks on his brother, how he is blessed with many, many talents …

More than material improvement
What Xiao Qiang still lacks (but which many children’s welfare workers in China consider important) is a well-furnished, air-conditioned house with sophisticated rehabilitation devices. More importantly, there are no professionals coming in to design a diet plan for him or measure
and record the child’s weight, height, and other physical development indicators. Every orphanage director in China knows that orphanages are established to offer shelter and food for the abandoned, and to save lives that would otherwise perish in cold street corners. It is ironic that 30 years after China’s modernization began, the general focus on meeting physical needs does not include areas such as cognition, emotion, and psychology.

Still, Mr. Ding, the director of the Ganzhou Orphanage in Jiangxi Province, is grateful for all the material improvements orphans are able to enjoy: “Nowadays,” he says, “the lives of these children are much better than our lives when we were young; the poor conditions we have endured are unimaginable these days.” Mr. Ding belongs to a generation which experienced hunger and poverty in the 1950s and 1960s. Many people like him are convinced that being materially better off is already the ultimate advancement, which has a profound influence on their opinion on what kind of care orphans need to receive: offering material comfort but neglecting emotional and psychological needs.

Is the “Blue Sky Plan” enough?
Sensing that many orphanages in China, especially those in the western provinces, only offer poor living conditions and limited facilities, the Civil Affairs Ministry in China launched a national project in 2006 named the “Blue Sky Plan”. With an annual budget of CNY 200 million from all levels of the Civil Affairs system—which means a national budget of CNY 6 billion in 5 years—the “Blue Sky Plan” is designed to provide advanced equipped nursing, education and rehabilitation at comprehensive children’s welfare institutions in big and medium-sized cities. As a result of this plan, thousands of large and beautiful buildings for orphans and disabled children have been set up, several of them in Anshun, Guizhou Province, where Mr. Zhang runs an orphanage. “These two buildings are the first construction phase of the project; the second phase will start soon,” Mr. Zhang explains, pointing at two empty 7-storey buildings, which will be filled up soon. They will give orphans a nice shelter but not necessarily a warm home.

The craze for material development to improve people’s lives blinds many people to other precious aspects of life—the bed-time stories, mommies’ home cooking, a friend’s secret—a real home, not just a roof over your head. Things have been changing for the better lately. Many NGOs in China have started foster care projects and hold trainings on child-focused work, thus putting a lot of effort into providing children with families. Many orphanages are also exploring new concepts of working with children. For people who believe that a family is better for raising an orphan than an institution, many problems will have to be solved.

Problems to be solved
First of all, orphanages in China are managed by many different government and semi-governmental agencies: the Civil Affairs Bureau, the Education Bureau, the Public Health Bureau, the Disabled People’s Federation, and the Red Cross, among others. How much a director of an orphanage can achieve when trying out new methods of child raising depends on the agencies’ decisions, the quality of his relationship with them and on how much energy he is willing to invest.

Secondly, at present, about 80% of the children in the orphanages in China are disabled. Many potential foster parents in China do not wish to adopt or foster care a disabled child. This unwillingness has practical reasons. Parents will have difficulties to find a school that accepts disabled children; medical bills will be high. For a disabled child, only CNY 200 to CNY 400 are subsidized by the government because financial priority is given to the construction of buildings.

In addition to this, there are certain local regulations on child welfare which make it hard for foster parents to create a home-like atmosphere. Foster children can be taken away from them quite easily. One local regulation, for example, requires an orphanage to accommodate at least 30 children in the building; another dictates that a child has to be transferred to a social institution for adults when he or she reaches the age of 14. Only if the local person in charge of child welfare understands the psychological implications of these rules for the children, can harm be averted.

Last but not least, many communities have limited resources; the orphanages lack both human resources (salaries are paid by the government and thus subject to the government budget) and technical support to follow up on individual cases in the communities.

With these difficulties in mind, how hard is it to turn a shelter into a real home? If policy makers, social welfare personnel and foster parents keep an open mind and avoid deviating from pursuing the best of every single child, chances are high they will succeed.
Can a small church community cure drug addiction? The members of the Miyi County Church in Yunnan Province and the clients of its drug rehabilitation center offer ample proof that this is indeed possible, as the examples of Li Xiu and dozens of other former addicts show. Li Xiu (pictured), a man in his late thirties, took his first shot in 1997 and, after that, was in and out of prison-like detoxification confinement for years until he decided to accept help from the local pastor. When he left the official detox center to join Pastor Li in Miyi, his guards predicted that he would be back in confinement soon, much like every other addict before. He did come back—but not as an addict.

Against all odds
Li Xiu is smiling contentedly as he tells us his story under a billowing mango tree at the church’s rehabilitation center, which he has been managing for some time now. He has very good reason to be happy. His long and thorny journey out of drug addiction not only reestablished his health; his venture also provided him with a wife and child (against all odds), redefined his spiritual life when he became a Christian and eventually put him in charge of the church’s rehabilitation program.

His way out of despair started in 2001 when his mother, a member of the Miyi Church, pleaded for help from the pastor because her son Li Xiu had for many years been unable to quit his drug addiction. She was not the only parent at church who was trying to cope with an addicted family member. In Yunnan, one of the major transit areas of drug trafficking between the so-called “Golden Triangle” and underground markets in China’s big cities further north, drug addiction began to spread in the 1980s when China’s borders opened. Today, addiction to heroin and several other synthetic drugs has become a common phenomenon, especially among young people, which affects church members and their families as well.

Why did Li Xiu start taking drugs in the first place? “It was a way of showing off,” he remembers, “because only people with considerable success in their business could afford drugs.” At that time, a shot of No. 4 quality heroin would cost up to CNY 800, an amount of money which could feed a whole family for a year. Li Xiu didn’t know at the time how devastating and addictive the drug was. When he finally realized what had happened, it was too late. A vicious cycle of imprisonment and renewed addiction after each release began. “One time,” he recalls, “I was about to be released from prison. I knew that my parents had cooked a good meal to welcome me home, but instead of going home I went straight to the drug dealer.”

For various reasons, inmates of the official rehabilitation centers have low rates of recovery and very high rates of relapse. Staff at the detox centers have a grim reputation for being rough on inmates. The death toll at the centers is high, and Li Xiu was going down that path at the time when his mother talked to Pastor Li.

What followed sounds like the story of The Cross and the Switchblade, the true story of a pastor who worked with young drug addicts in New York in the 1960s. Pastor Li prayed for days up in the mountains while Li Xiu was repeatedly told by his mother that the pastor was exerting himself for him. Finally, Li Xiu agreed to give it a try. He became the first drug addict cared for by the church, and Pastor Li became his drug rehabilitation mentor. More addicts joined the church group in the following years and in 2005, the church officially started the Gospel Drug Rehabilitation Center of the Jiangnan Christian Council because, by then, the government had allowed churches to conduct community-based services.

A rigorous recovery plan
At first, the members of the church didn’t quite share Pastor
Li's enthusiasm, but later on they changed their minds. Today, the congregation stands firmly behind the project. During the early phase of detoxification, when a drug addict shows severe withdrawal symptoms, several women in the congregation help the recovering addict cope with the situation. They cook for him, wash his clothes and keep him company until, after 10 days, the patient is able to attend church service and do light work.

The recovering drug addicts, all of them male, agree to follow a set of rigorous principles reminiscent to some degree of Benedictine monastic rules: pray and work. Their days are organized according to a strict schedule, starting at 6:30 in the morning and ending at 11 at night, when the evening prayer wraps up a busy day. The men's tasks include work in the kitchen, the church building or the small vegetable garden; their schedules also include prayer meetings, Bible reading times, meals and breaks. Not all of the patients are Christians, but they all comply with this regulated life of work and spiritual activities on their own accord because they want to get rid of their addiction once and for all.

Ten of them have managed to stay away from drugs for good, about 25% of all who have tried. This percentage of successful cases is much higher than that of other detox centers, where relapse rates range around 99%, according to official figures.

Why the church is successful
Three main reasons can be identified for the greater success of the church center, says Li Xiu. The first is the teaching of the Gospel. Even though it doesn't take all that long to get out of physical addiction, former drug users stay mentally tuned to taking drugs again. This is where the Bible comes in. Reading it, says Li Xiu, especially the book of Isaiah, chapter 55, verse 7, has helped him to see a future for himself. The center is also successful because it doesn't force its inmates to stay but treats them with respect. Whereas former drug addicts are heavily stigmatized by society, “nobody looks down on me at the church but everybody treats me like a brother in Christ,” says Li Xiu. This attitude at the church is one of the reasons why Li Xiu could get married: Drug addicts are usually unable to find spouses. His wife is a member of the congregation and works for the national railway, a fact of which Li Xiu is quite proud. The couple have a four-year-old daughter.

In 2007, Amity began to support the program with CNY 6 million, which had been donated by a wealthy Christian from China's east coast. This generous support allowed the congregation of the Miyi Church to designate the first floor of their newly constructed church building as the new drug rehabilitation center. The former quarters of the center, former workers’ homes built decades ago, had become too dangerous to live in. On the floor under the nave of the church, numerous rooms branch off from the central corridor, carrying names such as “Rehabilitation Room One”, “Rehabilitation Room Two”, “Reading Room”, “Pastor's Apartment” or “Visitors Room”. The arrangement follows a well-thought-out system which helps to guard former drug users against relapses or opportunities to smuggle in drugs but at the same time provides enough support for patients from the pastor as well as their families and friends. Up to 20 people could live and be cared for at the center, but the church allows only 10 people at one time to be taken on. More than 10 would be too difficult to handle for staff.

No drugs, ever!
People at the center are highly motivated to keep drugs out - not only in order to protect the convalescing addicts from relapse. It is vital for the survival of the program to prove to state authorities that the church is able to run the center properly. Otherwise, it would be closed down immediately, says Qiu Lin, general secretary of the Panzhihua Christian Council, which has supported the center for many years. Once, she remembers, the police paid the center an unannounced visit, hoping to catch drug users at the center red-handed. But with Mr. Li as the pastor and Li Xiu as the manager of the center, the facilities have remained drug-free.

Today, Li Xiu says, he sometimes returns to the old state-run detox center to play cards with his old prison guards who predicted his failure. They have changed their minds about church-run rehabilitation programs, as have other officials in the area. The vice director of the Public Security Bureau admits that Pastor Li and his team have hit a success in dealing with the drug problem. “He told me that he didn’t know anything about Christianity,” Pastor Li explains, “but he has realized that the Gospel Drug Rehabilitation Center has found a method that’s finally working.”
Grandma’s Hug

Since its inception 19 years ago, Amity’s Grandma Project has made a difference in the lives of many orphans. Wang Yi from Amity’s publicity division has talked to some of the Grandmas about their motivations and memories.

by Wang Yi

Recently, I had an opportunity to meet eight Amity Grandmas, talk to them and watch them at work, spending a memorable few hours with them. The Amity Grandma Project, started in 1991, is an innovative project designed to help children who are cared for in orphanages. The Grandmas provide physical and psychological care for orphans and disabled children on a daily basis. For children who need targeted care they assist with physical therapy and special education. These Grandmas, all of whom are volunteers, truly represent Amity’s motto in their work: “It is better to give than to receive”.

Most of the Grandmas are retired women who are driven by compassion to do something in and for their communities. Many of them are former teachers or nurses who have accumulated a substantial amount of experience dealing with small children. During my two hours of conversation with them I heard one sentence over and over again: “These children need affection and closeness more than anything else. Hug them and they feel very happy.”

What the Grandmas expressed in these simple words is exactly what a lot of scientists agree on: Psychological research shows that physical contact plays a crucial role in child development to ensure children’s mental well-being. One of the best ways to show genuine affection between people is hugging. Hugs not only make you happy but help you to reduce depressive moods or fatigue, too.

In recent years, Amity Grandmas have faced special challenges because the children in orphanages have changed over the years. Staff at the Zhenjiang Social Welfare Institute told me that today basically all the children who are placed and cared for in an institution are disabled. In the 1990s, the situation was completely different. “Before,” they said, “the majority of the children cared for were girls because, at that time, attitudes were relatively backwards, especially in the villages. Girls were regularly abandoned. Now, the situation is different. People basically believe that girls and boys are equally valuable. Therefore, over 90% of the children who are sent to a welfare institute in recent years are disabled, and the disabilities are becoming more and more serious.” It is especially bad when disabled children who have been abandoned by their parents are abandoned by society as well. The Amity Grandmas are at the forefront of helping these children grow up in a warm and caring environment.

Grandma Chu and her boy

Let’s take Chu Zhenlan, who, at 59, is the oldest and most experienced of the eight Grandmas. Her age didn’t show on her face at all when I talked with her. For an ordinary person like me it is almost unimaginable how much effort and how much patience went into Chu Zhenlan’s work with children during the nine years of her “career” as a Grandma. She has done a lot and she is now reaping a little reward: In February last year, Chu Zhenlan received a long-awaited call from across the Pacific Ocean. It was her “little grandchild”. The piping voice of a little boy on the phone was somewhat faint and remote, but there was the familiar “Grandma”. Hearing his voice was comforting for Chu Zhenlan and brought back to her the feelings of a time long past.

“She” little boy was an almost normal child when she got to know him. It was only his back which was covered with birthmarks that was unusual. Like with other children, Chu Zhenlan paid careful attention to his eating habits. Not long afterwards, the little boy developed a strong bond with Grandma Chu. It was only after she brought him back to his family to play there for a while that she realized that it was best to let the child grow up with a foster family. That was four years ago.

“The best relationship the boy had was with his grandfather,” Chu Zhenlan said, “he always told people that grandpa was great, that he loved to hug him, played with him, went with him to Nanjing, Changzhou and other cities nearby.” His grandfather even took him to the common bathhouse and wouldn’t get tired of it. “Today,” says Grandma Chu, “the boy lives overseas with a family which has adopted him.” Her greatest wish for him is that he grows up as a happy child.

It all started in 1991, when Hong Bihua left her position as a doctor which she had filled for half a lifetime. She was invited by the local church and she knew that there were children with
special needs who needed help. After a long discussion with Amity and the church, she finally convinced no less than three other retired staff from her former hospital to form the first group of Amity Grandmas.

Hong Bihua still remembers the first time she walked into the social welfare institute. The conditions in institutions like this were dissatisfying at that time. No more than one or two caretakers were responsible for about 30 children, which left many staff utterly exhausted. After carefully observing the children's living conditions, Dr. Hong listed several suggestions on how the situation could be improved, above all how staff behavior could become healthier. For example when caretakers or nurses enter a room, they should do so with clean hands because - as she explained - children's body defenses were still weak, so their environment had to be especially hygienic, including towels or drinking cups.

To spur quick changes in this matter, Dr. Hong assumed a position as a project staff in Amity's Social Welfare Division. It was good news for the children when she started with her job, because the children had so far had few chances to be taken outside. Every time the weather looked fine, Hong Bihua would bring the children outside to take a plunge into the mild spring light and breathe some fresh air. Later she would tell them which of the things they could see outside were flowers, grass, the blue sky or a white cloud. “Many people think,” says Hong Bihua, “that babies are too small to talk to. You only have to feed them or follow them around, people think. But you have to nurture their cognitive abilities not just their physical development! This should be done even more when children have disabilities.”

Hong Bihua mobilized all the resources she could find, inviting her friends from church to get involved. She matched up quite a few children with “grandparents” from her church and convinced her friends to prepare little gifts for the children, unpretentious but from the heart.

To reach more children, Hong Bihua helped the director of Amity's Social Welfare Division, Wu An An, to develop the “Amity Grandma Project”. In many cities across Jiangsu Province and beyond, Grandma projects were started and Hong Bihua was able to get access to many social welfare institutes for inspection. She not only improved the selection process of Amity Grandmas, she also pushed for training classes in medicine and caretaking for them. Still, Hong Bihua thinks that the most important advice for them is: “Hug the emotionally deprived children a lot and give them a sense of belonging!”

Early Support for Children with Impaired Sight

Discover Your Potentials

by Gao Mei

When Chen Suojin was a small boy, the goat on his parents’ farm was his only playmate. Chen Suojin was visually impaired and nobody wanted to play with him out of fear that his disability was contagious. When he turned eight, the boy was still unable to speak and his parents were very worried. It was not a hearing problem, the doctors said. So what was the reason for his silence?

The parents found the answer when a few teachers visited the village. The teachers from the Nantong Special Education Center were looking for small visually impaired children who needed special attention in their development but couldn’t get it in the remote countryside. After making some inquiries into the matter, the teachers found that nobody in the neighborhood ever spoke to Suojin.

Following this discovery, the teachers encouraged the neighbors each to speak at least one sentence per day with Suojin. Ten people would make ten sentences. The neighbors joined in this scheme enthusiastically, and one “grandma” actually made it her special task to teach the boy how to speak. Two months later, Suojin spoke his first words.

Teachers from the Nantong Special Education Center take part in an Amity project designed to provide home-based early intervention for small visually impaired children, both in the city and in the countryside. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) project doesn’t aim at reducing visual impairment, but tries to make sure that a disabled child can develop his or her potential skills in the best way possible. The project is based on the idea that every child’s early learning experiences should include such basic things as knowing the name of one’s favorite fruit, understanding what happens when people do something called “swimming” or how you go to the restroom on your own. A disabled child who doesn’t know such basic things simply hasn’t had a chance to learn them. Such a lack of opportunity profoundly affects a child’s future perfor-
Deaf Children

SigAm Enters a New Phase

After several years of establishing bilingual deaf education in schools for the deaf around the country, Amity is turning to changing educational policies in the next phase of the project in order to make it easier for deaf students to become teachers.

Two things are keeping deaf students in China from becoming teachers: First, only a limited number of universities accept deaf students. But even at these few institutions, only two subjects are open to them - art design and computer technology. No teaching courses are available to deaf students. Second, in order to teach, graduates are required to take an exam of standard Mandarin, which deaf students are not able to pass.

In the fall of 2009, a group of experts from Amity’s bilingual projects was invited to give lectures at the Chongqing Teachers University to introduce the concept of bilingual deaf education as well as their project experiences. At the same time, they talked to the school leaders about the opportunities for establishing a teachers’ training course on education for deaf students.

Wu An An, the director of Amity’s Social Welfare Division, argued that the policy of requiring the deaf to pass the standard Mandarin exam means “shutting the door” on them, preventing them from becoming teachers if they wish. (By now, the Chongqing government has scrapped the Mandarin test for deaf students as a result of constant advocating for policy change!)

Teachers from the Suzhou school, who have taken part in the SigAm project for many years, traveled with the Amity group and shared their experiences as deaf teachers with their colleagues in western China.

Giving deaf people a chance to become teachers and employing more deaf teachers in schools for the deaf in China has many advantages. Deaf teachers are good role models for deaf students; both deaf teachers and deaf students understand each other better because they share the same language, the Chinese sign language. Therefore, deaf teachers can help deaf students solve problems in their study better than hearing teachers.

As Ms. Zhang Wenjing from Chongqing Normal University has put it: “A good education doesn’t mean to simply bring those with the best exams into university, but rather to give hope to the so-called ‘hopeless’.”

“Inspection Tour”

Students from the Nanjing Foreign Language School and the Middle School of Nanjing Normal University as well as last year’s outstanding Amity volunteers and entrepreneurs went on a three-day trip to visit nearly 80 rural households in Shandong Province, where they visited orphans who do not receive any financial support. During the trip called “On the Road – the 2010 inspection tour to orphan projects in the Yimeng mountainous area”, the 22 participants, who paid for the trip themselves, collected information about the orphans, checked on the work done for them so far, and distributed carefully selected small gifts.

Drawing attention to pressing social needs and poor living conditions in remote areas is a major concern of Amity. Trips like this are regularly organized to raise awareness among the general public and to provide opportunities for volunteers to get involved in useful charity work.