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Young guns: This holiday season, it is truly better to give than to receive

By Johanna Armstrong

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Photo courtesy of Johanna Armstrong Columnist Johanna Armstrong and Feng Zi Xuan paint their T-shirts this summer in Beijing.

This summer I had the privilege of traveling to Beijing for two months to study the language. While in Beijing, I had the opportunity to visit two schools and a community center for migrant underprivileged children.

The group I was with helped clean up the one of the school's dorms and design and paint a mural for the community center while promoting environmental awareness. We worked and spoke with the children in the area, learning more about them, their culture, their language and their lives.

At one of the schools, we were paired off with a child and given paint and two shirts, which we were to decorate and then exchange with one another. The girl I was with, Feng Zi Xuan, was 10 years old.

She had lived in Beijing for five years, her parents worked all day to try to pay for food and clothes, and she attended a school without functional air conditioning, concrete floors and a primarily volunteer staff. The majority of the school's money went toward trying to keep it open.

Feng Zi Xuan's neighborhood had very small family-run shops, no major buildings and few cars. She and her classmates were as close as they could get to the city. Government laws prohibit free movement between areas.

Making a difference

Despite these difficulties, hardships and an unstable livelihood, these kids show up for school every day, study hard, try to stay out of trouble, and were indescribably grateful for the few hours we spent with them.

The shirt Feng Zi Xuan made for me had a picture of a house by a mountain and blue stepping stones, with the words, "Your Chinese friend, Feng Zi Xuan. China welcomes your arrival," written in orange Chinese characters.

The fact that everyone was wearing their shirts and large smiles after we were done is a testament to the power a moment can have on somebody.

Indeed, that is something I think we need to consider more deeply now on the cusp of the holiday season, the season of giving, receiving, being grateful, loving, accepting and respecting one another.

My example was a dramatic one. I don't expect anybody to travel to a different country to volunteer, or even to a local organization, though these are more overt ways of helping communities.

I'm not even asking that you donate to charities, an act which some people see as obligation or an easy way out of manual labor, though I agree it is a very good way to celebrate the spirit of giving.

Charity

What I am saying is simple and common knowledge. Yet it's a rare occurrence. Provide some general, blind, beautiful and simple kindness.

Do this amid the rush and stress of the holiday season, amid chores, children and errands, amid bad drivers, slow walkers and dirty looks.

It can be something as easy as saying "hello," as smiling, as being polite, as leaving a kind note in a public place. Do something, anything, that indicates that you are aware of the people around you, that you are aware that they, too, are human, and deserving of at least one or two kind words.

We can't know everything about everyone. We can't even assume to know the first thing about a stranger, and yet we are quick to judge, to assume that they maliciously cut us off in traffic or that they were intentionally rude.

Worse, we just ignore strangers altogether and put our interests first. Everybody has problems, difficulties, bad days, bad weeks and our apathy and self-indulgence does nothing if not worsen the living conditions around us.

Especially now, in the holiday season when there are some of us without families to celebrate with, with weakening spirits being grated by ignorance and misunderstanding, without the money to buy our children, our spouses, our parents something we feel they truly deserve, we shouldn't let minor annoyances blind us from the fact that there's more than just our lives out there.

We're sharing space with millions of people, and there's no avoiding that. The least we can do is make our lives a little easier, and realize

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we're all in this together.

As I learned with Feng Zi Xuan in a concrete building in Beijing, a word, a smile, a moment is all we really need to at least subtly change our community for the better, not just for these next two months, but forever.

This is the opinion of Johanna Armstrong, a student at St. John's Prep. Her column is published the third Sunday of the month.

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