

Interview with May Jiang Fei of a Catholic Social Service Centre

How did you come to be involved in the Social Service Centre?

I am an accountant by profession, and I also went to Ireland in 2003-05 to do language study. When I returned from Ireland, I saw that the Social Service Centre was recruiting so I applied. Previously, I had worked as an accountant in an enterprise company and my work there was not so fulfilling, so my family supported me in this move.

I started off just doing accounting for the Social Service Centre and, in 2006, I moved into administration as well. There are now 10 staff in the Centre altogether. I don't personally have a lot of contact with the people we help, e.g. the HIV/AIDS patients. However, I do know about the projects. For example, last year, on 1-2 December [2006], I helped with our promotional material which we put out on the occasion of World AIDS Day.

Do you think this work has made a difference to you in any way?

Before, I earned a lot of money and I was just like everyone else in society, chasing after material goods. Now I work together with the nuns, and they have had an influence on me. For example, I now only buy things when I need them; I'm not so materialistic any more.

All kinds of people work at our Centre – priests, nuns, believers and non-believers – we all watch each other and learn from each other. When we recruit people, we only consider one thing, whether they can do the job or not, and nothing else. Many are attracted by the atmosphere at the Centre, it's so peaceful and calm and very different from other places of work. Some have even come to faith through working with us. I would say working here has made me more settled and peaceful at heart, more steady, more joyful than before.

How long do you think you will stay with the Centre? Do you think one day you will move on?

As long as I can do the work and it satisfies me, I will stay. Maybe I will do some further study later on, for example, study social service work. I see that, through our work, we can influence and help many people; we can make a difference. That keeps me doing what I do.

What do your friends think of your job?

They are interested in what I do but they lead very busy lives, they'd like to volunteer but they can't find the time, maybe later.

Can you share any examples of how people's lives have been changed through the work you have done?

Yes, we will give you a few examples ...

(1) There was one young man, 30 years old, who had HIV/AIDS. He was a bright guy who worked in information technology but he became so depressed about his situation that he gave up his job and gave up on life. He wanted to end his life. At first, he called us to get information about us and build up his confidence, and then eventually he visited our office.

One of our sisters took him under her wing and worked with him over several months. She would call him and visit him, especially when he was at rock bottom and wanted to end his life. At such times, he would ask her, "Why are you even bothering to help me?" You know, usually we try to separate faith from the help we give so as to avoid any misunderstandings, but when asked a question directly like this, the sister was able to share how it was her faith and love that motivated her to stand by him.

Our Service Centre often helps people by simply connecting them with the resources they need. In the case of this guy, we consulted a hospital in Beijing and supported him to go there for treatment for one month. The sister went to Beijing to visit him while he was there. When he came back, he was rejuvenated. He found work again in I.T. and even came to faith, being baptised in April 2006. Now this guy is in a stable condition and values his life once more.

(2) We do some service learning projects involving students from local colleges. The students from these big universities are themselves originally from poor backgrounds, and we encourage them to visit nearby villages and motivate the kids there to study harder. Most village kids see no point in studying. These college students help open the village-kids' eyes to the wider world, telling them about geography, other places, foreign lands, and teaching them sports, etc. They help the kids to see that study has a purpose and value.

Often, after their contact with each other, some of the naughtiest village kids burst into tears and start crying, saying that they will study harder because they want to be like these college students. Now we also try to foster an attitude in the village kids that they should learn to give as well as receive. We usually leave behind paper and stamps with the kids so that they can choose to write a thank you letter to the college students who took the time to visit them and motivate them. In this small way, we encourage the village kids to look beyond themselves and give something back as well as taking.

(3) In China, many people living in poor rural areas go to the bigger cities to seek a better life for themselves and their families there. Unfortunately, they often

have few or no skills to offer and find it very hard to find or keep a job once they get to the city.

We try to offer help to such migrants to prepare them for their life in the big city. We help them with legal aid, such as how to deal with employment contracts, and this help is free. We also offer vocational training for rural dwellers planning to migrate to cities, e.g. cooking, computers, how to bake western cakes for hotels, welding, conveyor belt assembly line practices, etc. We contact local schools and vocational schools to subsidise such training, getting the schools to agree to help them find jobs after graduation. The people get around three months training and don't need much prior education before this training.

(4) With our HIV/AIDS work, we have no hospices yet so we mostly do home visits to patients. Once, one patient was dying in hospital and was in the last stages of the disease, the doctors had already left him alone because they couldn't do any more. Two sisters went to see this patient (also a female lay volunteer). The patient was projectile vomiting blood, this was very dangerous, and the doctors and nurses were afraid of getting infected so they just left him alone, abandoned him. One sister was a doctor, so she gave him some injections to help him through this final stage, and eventually he died.

This patient had one brother around, nobody else was there for him. After he died, they had to change him into his burial clothes quickly or else his body would become too stiff. The brother was ready to do this but couldn't do it by himself, he needed help. However, the patient was a man so the sisters asked me (Father Zhang) if it was ok to help, explaining the need in this case. It was a very emotional situation, and there are many unexpected situation like this where we have no training, we simply have to respond on the spot.

Once they had finished preparing the body, the told others that the body was ready. Another patient with AIDS had been observing all this and wept when he saw it. He said, "Now I believe that, when it's my turn to die, I won't be all alone." People with this disease trust the sisters through such experiences. I feel the sisters do need more training to prepare them for the unexpected and keep them safe. Sisters are sometimes afraid of situations but are more than willing to do things, to take risks out of love.

Finally, how can people pray for your work?

- Pray for young people in China to have a better sense of their social responsibilities.
- Pray for the staff at the Social Services Centre, that they might grow in maturity and stability in their work, and that they would view their work as a mission, a calling.
- Pray for the development of the churches in China.
- Pray that the weakest and most marginalised people in China will get comfort through the work that we do.