

Pulse

A PUBLICATION OF THE NUS MEDICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 3
JUNE 2007

When I grow up



Guide to Overseas Community Service

READY FOR THE WORLD?

it's at your feet
by Serene Tan

NOBODY said that doing community service overseas was ever going to be easy. Cost and homesickness, among others, are pertinent concerns for many of us. So before you leap onto the next flight out to the middle of a disaster- or poverty-stricken zone, PULSE speaks to Waijia and Marc, 2 medical students who have been actively volunteering, as well as Dr. Lim Meng Kin, who has years of experience working in humanitarian missions overseas on the practical aspects of volunteering in foreign lands.

Waijia is the author of *Kitesong*, a book written and illustrated entirely by Waijia following her trip to Nepal. (For more information about *Kitesong* or Waijia's current community projects, see kitesong.blogspot.com.) while Marc has been on 2 trips to North-Eastern Thailand under the Youth Expedition Project. Dr. Lim is a relief missions veteran, having served with WHO, the World Bank, and International Red Cross among other organizations. He had previously served as the Chief of the SAF Medical Corps and is now chairman of the Singapore Red Cross Disaster Preparedness Committee and vice-chairman of the Tsunami Reconstruction Facilitation Committee.

Enough Money?

Generally speaking, individuals who set out on overseas CIP as part of a group can expect to be partially subsidized to fully sponsored, as compared to those who opt to wing it alone.

Some churches and Christian groups offer fully sponsored CIP trips for successful applicants, which was what Dr. Lim opted for. Such applicants may have to come before a panel for rounds of interview and evaluation prior to approval.

Groups that have a fixed base location in the area generally have temporary or permanent volunteer quarters, which resemble hostels or bunks. Such an arrangement renders accommodation costs unnecessary, and hence saves some budget for the purchase of supplies required. Waijia chose to stay at the orphanage during her trip to Nepal, which also provided her meals. Another possibility is the common funds raising method held prior to the trip, which was adopted by Marc's team when they visited Khon Kaen.

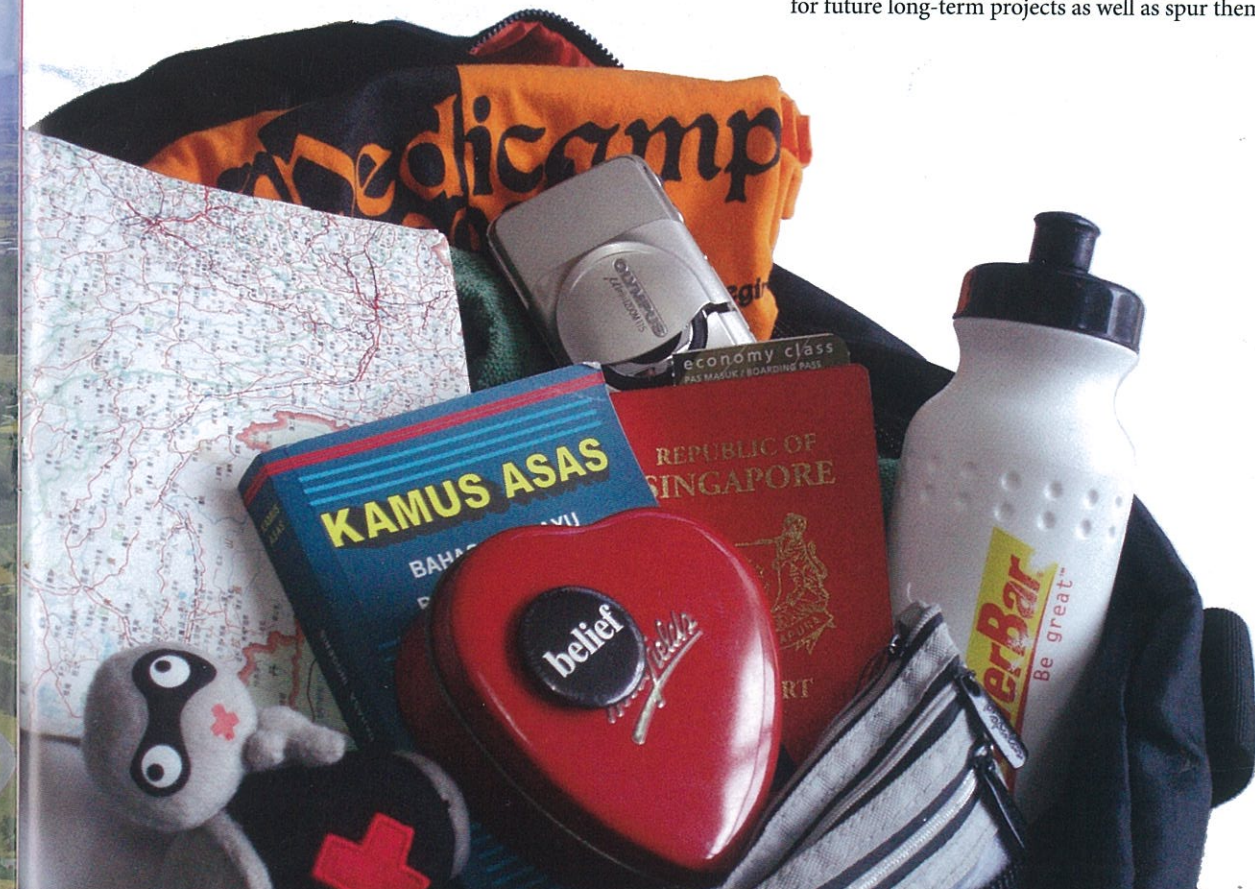
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Teams also save on bulk bookings of cheapest economic flights and bus trips to their destination points. Depending on the destination, airfare can vary drastically, and prices of individual seats can fluctuate greatly throughout the year, as compared to group bookings, which tend to stay relatively constant, and are cheaper on average.

Do I actually make a difference?

Have you ever felt that overseas CIP trips are futile? Perhaps deep down, you are convinced that overseas CIP is actually waste of time and money: where pampered people of first world countries make a halfhearted effort to serve the needy for a while, then return to their lives of luxury. Why not simply donate the money and let the professional full-timers run the programs?

In fact, according to our interviewees, one common misconception about overseas CIP trips is that one actually makes a big difference to the lives of the people in that country within the few weeks one is there. Many, if not all, short-term trips without some long-term follow up or commitment hardly make a significant impact. As Waijia elaborates, "Those who understand this will gain most fulfillment, as they are aware of their limited aid in that span of time. But it should serve as a platform to gain experience for future long-term projects as well as spur them on to



Think you are all
packed?

make a lasting difference to our own communities within our reach.”

Marc adds that despite the obvious advantages in time, familiarity and resources that can be achieved in sustained local CIP, the difference lies in the exposure and insight into other communities, cultures and lifestyles. Waijia though, notes that one must also be mindful of the foreign influence one exerts while doing CIP, saying, “The constant intrusion of visitors who come and go, often leads to an increased sense of instability in the area, especially in children at orphanages.”

Dr.Lim, however, answers “I’ve seen how the mere presence of short term helpers can be such an encouragement to the full timers who often labour alone, unnoticed, and unappreciated. Moreover, short term exposures could be inspiring and even life-changing, leading to longer term commitments. Staying at home without venturing further may deprive one - of the exposure and the inspiration - more than our potential beneficiaries.”

Am I ready for it?

Nevertheless, don’t make a dash for the door just yet. Insofar as volunteers of any age, race, religion, occupation and background are warmly welcomed in almost any region, one must keep in mind the vital fact that “there is no place for disaster tourism”, as Dr. Lim rightly puts it. Many blindly or naively venture forth into areas of disaster and humanitarian crises on a moment’s whim, inadequately prepared for the physical and emotional ordeal that awaits them. Indeed, many a times, crisis relief teams have had to abandon deeper rescue efforts when one of the team falls ill, gets injured, or breaks down psychologically in the face of massive mortality.

Volunteers are encouraged to attend preparatory courses in crisis intervention (available at Singapore Red Cross, or certain church organizations) as well as ensure that their level of fitness and emotional status are compatible with the task at hand before heading out on a mission trip.

All in all

Feeling daunted by the requirements listed so far? Fret not. Each trip is unique in terms of duration, location, scale and focus! Everyone will eventually draw up their own comprehensive plans of action. To end, here are a few more nuggets of advice from our panel of volunteers to help you do just that...

Those who have a clear sense of purpose of why they decided to go and are willing to step out of their comfort zone to render help to others will find the greatest satisfaction in such work.

A heart eager to help and a mind eager to learn are certainly valued. But of course, requisite skills ensure that projects are completed with minimum waste and maximum efficiency.

It’s best to prepare (oneself) mentally and emotionally as well as adjust your objectives and expectations realistically. Volunteers are usually the ones who receive much more in terms of emotional and spiritual growth from the locals, rather than the other way around.

Think about the impact you wish to make on the locals in terms of cultural, socioeconomic, healthcare and educational exchange and myriad other factors. Weigh the pros and cons of these objectively before you start packing your backpack for an exhilarating trip of personal growth and self-discovery.

For more on overseas CIP, try these well-established organizations and embark on your own journey!



Youth Expedition Project (YEP): <http://www.yep.sg/>



Singapore International Foundation (SIF): <http://www.sif.org.sg/svo/index.asp>



Interserve: <http://www.interserve.org/about.htm>



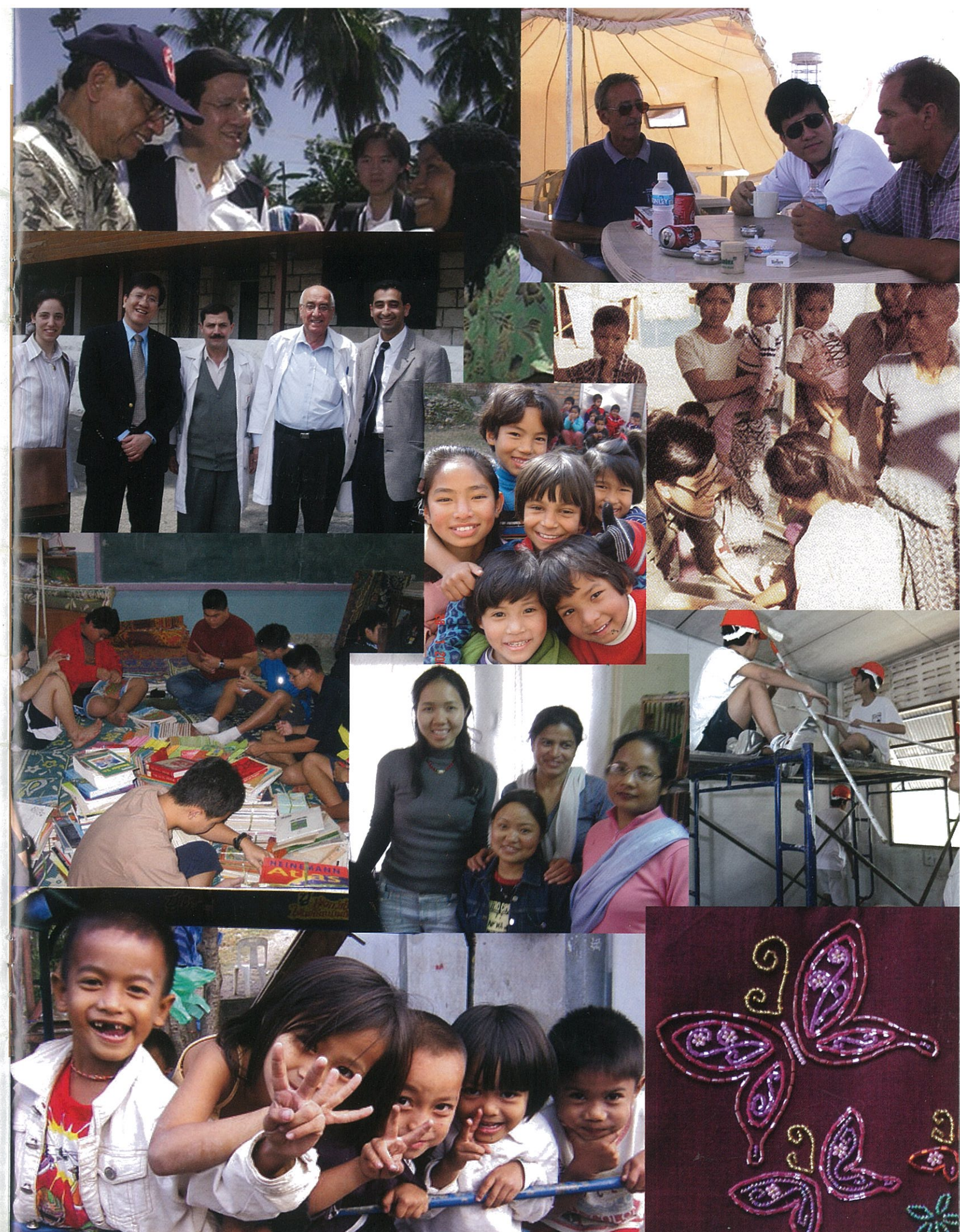
Linking hands: <http://www.linkinghands.org/>



Worldvision: <http://worldvision.org.sg/>



Don't forget to bring your heart with you!



THE DUMMY'S GUIDE TO LOCAL COMMUNITY SERVICE

Not sure which organization needs your expertise most? Need more information? Let Pulse help you find the project that expands your potential! Here's a list classified by interest:

For the Disoriented:

NVPC AND CSCDC are two comprehensive Central "hubs" to help students do interest-help group matching to help students narrow down their interests into discrete categories, and then the system generates matches for them based on their ranked preferences. More can be found at http://www.nvpc.org.sg/school_youth/ or http://www.centraislingapore.org.sg/cos/o.x?c=/cscdc_corp/section&p=home/active_citizenry/&n=avenues

For the Broad-based Volunteer:

Care Community Services Society (CareCom) is a large non-profit organization with 5 key concerns under its auspices –the youth, children, elderly, counseling and community. Organizes lots of high profile events; thus they are in constant need of organizers and help for these events. The underlying objective for CareCom is to build and strengthen family ties. Has well-established programs in place to meet the needs of everyone in society so volunteers can put their interests and skills to good use. If you can't decide which target group to help, try this. <http://www.carecom.org.sg/>

For the Sports-Oriented:

Singapore Disability Sports Council (SDSC) is an organization to rally the disabled to fulfill their dreams as an athlete to represent Singapore in the disability games such as Paralympics, etc. Volunteers are needed for events planning, transport, training, medical support, admin support. http://www.sdsc.org.sg/how_you_can_help/become_a_volunteer/

For the Under-the-carpet-by-the-moonlight-artist:

Very Special Arts, Singapore is a prominent non-profit organization. Helps to engage disabled artists and artistes in performing, visual arts and organise exhibitions and fund raising. Provides training programs for schools to raise public awareness. Needs people to raise funds for activities and volunteers for plays or as dancers, therapists etc. http://www.vsa.org.sg/arts_events/index.html

For Those Passionate in Pedagogy:

Asian Women's Welfare Association serves children and teens with autism and multiple disabilities from birth to 18yrs. AWWA focuses on social services and therapies to these children and their families. Help mentor the children in terms of schoolwork or as a volunteer for hydrotherapy, admin, school activities and outings. http://www.awwa.org.sg/awwass/abtus_vol.html

For the Intrinsic Medical Student:

Kidney Dialysis Foundation (KDF) helps patients and their families with financial and social help. Reaches out to patients in SGH, TTSH, NUH, and private dialysis centers. Needs people to help raise funds and work with their social work dept (mostly administrative). You could be an ambassador for annual fundraising events or outreach volunteers to work with patient welfare and follow ups. Not to be confused with the NKF! http://www.kdf.org.sg/volunteer_corner.htm

Under the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (MINDS), the MINDS youth group is a dedicated team of youth and young adults who meet weekly to train intellectually disabled and autistic children from MINDS. They provide vocational, social skills training and supervised employment to help guide them into mainstream society. They are looking for people who can commit regularly and are interested in cementing firm bonds with the wards of the programs. <http://www.myg.org.sg/>



“I've seen how the mere presence of short term helpers can be such an encouragement to the full timers who often labor alone, unnoticed, and unappreciated.”

- Dr Lim Meng Kin

“It truly opened my heart and mind to what poverty means to people. I've learnt to be more appreciative of the things I've been blessed with, and that contentment really comes from within.”

- Tan Wai Jia

“There's another world out there which the first-world tends to forget (and leave behind)...in the midst of the business (and change).”

- Ho Zheng Jie Marc

