

From the online diary of volunteer:

project muhibah from an insider's view

by Miak

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ryan wrote about project muhibah at words fail me. he wrote it in the 3rd person perspective, and it was about one of the one room flats we helped out with.

running around from flat to flat, making frantic phone calls, last minute requests, i didn't have much time to think - it was just do, do, do. after some rest over the weekend, i had time to send smses to thank some of those who turned up, like crispian, cyrus, james, melvin, and paul. (i forgot to send to some of the others - susan, jeremy, amongst others)

i wished that all the volunteers could go around to each flat and see how it was like before, and how it was like after the project.

the first flat i stepped in, the unit on the ground floor which the group crispian, cyrus and james were in was assigned to, broke my heart. you know the marks that is left on your bedsheet when you crushed a mosquito which was feeding on you and you rolled over it?

the mattress was full of those marks - dried blood from crushed bed bugs. the corners of the mattress was also caked with so much excretion from the bed bugs that they were completely black - i wonder how long has it been since the sheets were last changed.

there was bed bug excretion in the cracks in the walls, the casing for the wiring for the electrical switches - like many of the volunteers, i have not seen a live bed bug before - much less an infestation on this scale.

i wondered how anyone could live in such conditions. and when i went round with the pest exterminator from unit to unit. one of the units on the third floor, the one paul was sent to, was one of the units in dire need of help too. the old lady stayed there with her mentally challenged son, probably in his fifties. the wall next to the bed was smeared with blood - probably from him crushing bed bugs that also infested this unit. the pest exterminator pointed out the bed bugs scuttling out of the cracks in the wall to us while he was spraying the insecticide into the them.

when i returned later to that flat, the volunteers (melvin's group) had scrubbed the bed frames, scrubbed the floors, and repainted the walls - i was amazed by the transformation - it was a world of difference. from the melvin's sms, "the lady staying here was extremely happy with the new mattresses, pillows and blankets coz the volunteers and me saw the glow and happiness on her face". honestly, the new beddings was nothing compared to what they had done.

ryan's account was from his perspective, but there was more to the story.

when Christine went around checking out a few days earlier which units required fumigation and replacement of mattresses, the frail old lady refused any help - and so she wasn't on the list. on the day itself, when Christine tried to convince her once again, she was refused. the brown splotches ryan described wasn't remnants of bed

bugs - it was the excretion.

and while the flat was fumigated some time ago, i am skeptical that the bed bug infestation was eliminated. her mattress too, was covered with bed bug excretion, though it was not as extreme as the flat on the ground floor.

Christine told me about it, and me being me, could not let this be. stubborn old cantonese ladies are my forte. i was brought up by one of the most stubborn - my grandma, i knew how they think, and how to get through to them. i grew up in the midst of ma-jies and this old lady was clearly one because of her combed up hair.

we managed to convince her to accept a new mattress - and her rationale was something i was used to - she probably spent quite a bit on the mattress and she wasn't willing to throw it away, and she couldn't see very well, so how could she see the condition the mattress was in? it didn't matter that we had to arrange to make another trip to buy extra mattresses and bedsheets, it didn't matter if we had to spend more. i think a lot of us couldn't leave without doing something about it.

there was an old couple who lived on the eighth floor who were senile. it was heartwarming though, as jerry pointed out - they may not have anything much left, but they have each other. wherever the old man went, the old lady followed. the flat reeked of excretion, because one of them was incontinent, but the group, led by susan, was unfrazzled. ramon tried his best to scrub the toilet bowl, despite it being stained black from years of grime. when i returned on my last round to check, they had transformed the flat - and it was bright and smelled fresh for the first time in many years.

another unit had queen sized problem. we went over to fumigate the apartment, but we did not realise the extent of the problem until much later. her bed was a queen sized bed. we had only a single sized mattress.

and what's worse, bed bugs were still crawling out of the bed when it was carried out to the corridor to make space while the volunteers painted the house. i was alerted to the problem, but i was at my wits end. it wasn't likely for me to get a bed on the same day. her legs were weak and a normal bed would be too low for her. moreover, we were already way over budget. the old lady did implore us to help - she was willing to pay for the bed, but we had no way of changing the bed unless we return another day. i had a hard time figuring out the solution. in the end, i decided to try spraying insecticide on the bed and get rid of the bed bugs.

i was called away to attend to yet another situation halfway through, and i was away for a while. when i came back, i was told that they killed more than 20 bed bugs, flushed out by the amount of insecticide i sprayed (2/3 of a can of baygon?). the volunteers could not bear to let the old lady sleep in this condition, and called jerry to ask him to buy a bed on their behalf.

jerry was calling a few of us when he was about to buy the bed. none of us picked up his call. when he called daniel, he was told there was a bed that one of the flats in his area is giving away. it was a super single - the kind that is higher than our normal standard frames. it was a miracle that we got what she needed.

i went around to distribute dinners to those old folks who stayed at home - and in each flat, i saw a transformation. the flats, dark and sad looking earlier that morning, were bright and clean - and the old folks were grateful for that, and you can see the twinkle of joy in their eyes.

i wish i could convey it to each and every one of the volunteers, who knelt down to scrub the floors, the toilet bowls, who got themselves splattered with paint, who overcame their fear of cockroaches and bed bugs. perhaps i can - i hope to do that when i am done with editing the video of this project.

jerry said that we must be realistic and realise that we can't change the world. i disagree. we have changed the world for these old folks.