

From the online diary of volunteer:

words fail me, but i try

by Ryan

17 Jan 05

the group of six approached the sixth floor unit not knowing what to expect. as they got closer, a chorus of fierce barks erupted along with the rattling of bells, chains, and the metal gate. two dogs, one a schnauzer-shihtzu mix, the other a dachshund, menacingly guarded the flat.

an old lady, with jet black hair and glasses, sat near the door and restrained the dogs as the group made clear the purpose of their visit.

clearly expecting the guests, she called out for her neighbor to take the dogs away. upon entering the flat, an older lady, more frail than the first and with gray hair and glasses too, came into view. she sat on the bed near the window, not quite acknowledging the presence of the intruders, and seemed to be deep in thought.

the apartment, barely 250 square feet, was sparsely decorated with knick-knacks which have seen better times. a calendar carrying a portrait of jesus hung off the wall near the door. canes, water pots, bags and other paraphernalia surrounded the calendar. the wall next to the bed was bare, save for brown splotches spread like freckles on the women's faces. these were not feces thrown in fits of dementia, but remnants of bed bugs fumigated months before. furniture was minimal. apart from the single bed, a foldable table and stools occupied the living area that stood only a tiny step away from the bed. the kitchen, more of a narrow hallway between the bathroom and the rest of the apartment, held assorted pots, bottles, rugs, detergent, and other bare essentials. a single stove, covered with a metal tray in anticipation of the mess brought by the visitors, stood inches away from the garbage chute just under the window. the older lady told them not to wet the stove, for that was her only stove.

the team of volunteers quickly assessed what had to be done. like the slip of paper instructed, the bathroom ceiling was in need of a new coat of paint. not only was paint peeling, but cracks had appeared on the concrete.

but the equipment did not include putty or any alternate solution. apart from the coffin-length and -breadth bathroom, the wall around the sink was peeling as well, exposing a blue undercoat.

the spotted wall concerned the team. just then, one of the organizers came by to check on the progress. noticing the stains, she implored the older lady to let them paint the wall. with her back to the wall, the lady refused in cantonese, "no! no! you'll mess up my flat, making it all dusty and dirty. leave it as it is." the exchange went on for a while, but the lady stood her ground. after all, she couldn't see well. what matter was it that her wall was stained?

so the team got to work. half the team worked at scraping the paint off the bathroom ceiling and around the sink before applying several coats of white paint, while the others cleaned the rest of the apartment. this went on for a few hours.

while work went on, several people came by. a lady, brandishing both mandarin and hokkien, and possibly from the help center on the ground floor, informed the old ladies that there would be no lunch served tomorrow, and that they would have to cook the meal themselves. another of the organizers dropped off a bottle of water for the team, but the younger lady offered them packets of ice cold chrysanthemum tea instead. neighbors not involved in the project looked in as they walked by ever so often. the organizers came by again, this time offering to change the mattress, knowing it must also be covered with dead bed bugs. another exchange of words ensued, but with a different outcome. the mattress would be delivered later in the day. anticipating the new comfort, the older lady tore off the bedsheet and proceeded to the bathroom wanting to wash it. she had forgotten. the painters offered to wash it for her. "many thanks," she said.

the team took turns to rest and chatted with the younger lady. they were friends and had lived there for six years, after having been evicted from a similar flat in the vicinity that had made way for new apartment blocks. she was unmarried. the older lady had a daughter. asked where the daughter was, she shrugged. hard of hearing and sight, the older lady was oblivious to the inquisition.

when the bedsheet had dried, the old lady approached on cue. the painters, fearful of her balance in the cluttered kitchen, retrieved it too. thanking them, she returned to her bed and started fitting it. she had forgotten again.

"ah po, that's your old mattress."

"no, this is the new mattress, isn't it? the old mattress's there." she pointed at the corner. there was nothing.

while waiting for the arrival, some of them sat outside, on the stairs in front of the neighbor's flat. conversing with her, whom they suspected to have been a mamasan, they realized that the dogs, bitches, were shared with the old ladies.

"happy! cocoa! let's go look for ah po!" the dogs bounded excitedly for the flat, straining against their leashes.

outside her flat, she had also reared some twenty hamsters. they had been placed outside because of their stench. inside, boxes were stacked against the wall, but what lay inside them remains a mystery. the organizers distributed chinese new year decorations, bringing new excitement to the occupants. the neighbor then brought her christmas decorations out to show the group, telling them that these had to be sealed and kept for future use.

she had had to throw her christmas tree away for it was old and dusty. the new mattress arrived as dusk crept near. the old ladies could not contain their joy and rained the group with proclamations of gratitude. the mattress came with new bedsheets, so she washed though old one was thrown away. the effort of washing the old bedsheet may have seemed to be in vain, but what did it matter?

the day ended, and work was done. the old ladies got a new mattress, some newly painted walls, and company for a day. despite having spent the day with old folk, did these volunteers know anything about them? and did they really help them? life went on,

and life goes on, as it did before, for as long as it takes. for as long as it takes for death to take them, the same way they came, alone.

on her way to buy lunch for the team, the team leader noticed several alarms set off by emergency cords in the flats. she asked the caretaker at the help center if he was doing anything about them. he shrugged. "they'll turn off on their own," he said with a smile.