



Changing Lives One Community at a Time

The Yunnan Institute of Development Tackles One of China's Poorest Provinces

By JENNY LEAL

BEN Nixon has a decade of experience working with NGOs in developing countries, but the year spent working with the Yunnan Institute of Development (YID) has been his most rewarding experience to date.

During his time as a volunteer this young Australian, who has a degree in rural development and a master's in community development, helped the YID found eight preschools in isolated villages in minority ethnic areas.

Yunnan is one of China's poorest provinces, and setting up preschools in the Daxi area is just one facet of the YID Child Aid project. Its overall aim is to better the lives of children by improving their

whole environment in the isolated remote mountainous counties of Eshan and Xinping.

Here, there are no proper roads or public transportation; there is only one telephone in the village committee building and TVs and radios are rare. Villagers are of the Shansu ethnic minority, a branch of the Yi ethnic group. Ninety percent of the population only speak their own language. Most young people are illiterate and seldom communicate with people outside the community, which is a major deterrent to bettering their lives and battling poverty.

The YID mobilizes and builds the capacity of local people to find sustainable solutions to poverty, inadequate health and education levels and ecological damage.

Although still in its infancy, with the help of volunteers like Nixon it is moving one step at a time towards improving lives.

"I found my time with YID to be effective," says Nixon. "Like most projects, it was run on limited funds and relied heavily on community mobilization."

Nixon says that buildings were acquired and repaired and teachers from villages found and trained for the eight preschools on a budget of less than 3,000 Australian dollars, including teacher salaries for the first year.

"Even more encouraging is that since the 12-month support period ended, villagers have successfully taken on the financial and managerial responsibilities of the preschools," says Nixon.

Teacher and project coordinator Elisabeth Axelsen says these schools are still in a transition and that more community participation is expected. This is what makes the YID unique and effective. Its projects, agreed by the villagers themselves, are aimed at running independently in the short term.

The preschool project was an obvious need in Yunnan as many students there drop out due to bad Chinese and poor social skills. Since the schools opened, the preschool children have moved on to first, second and third grades and are much more sociable and alert. They learn Chinese quickly and, according to their parents, are more helpful.

Axelsen says another way they found of reducing poverty was suggesting to women that they sew small bags to sell. Reticent at first, the women were thrilled at earning their first money and receiving more orders. The YID has also tried to teach farmers ways of earning money other than tobacco production by giving them training seminars on walnut tree planting.

There are also projects aimed at improving the environment, particularly conditions in mudslide-prone areas. Hygiene is another big problem in rural Yunnan, as many schools and sometimes whole villages have no latrines.

The ultimate goal of each project is to make people in a community capable of making conditions better by themselves within three years. "They will never be rich, but if we can improve lives and ensure that kids get an education, that will be great," says Axelsen.

Axelsen has worked with the YID for two years and with its part-

ner International Humana People to People since it started in 1978. Child Aid is a project of Humana, one of 26 worldwide. Axelsen says the partnership mainly involves establishment of projects. Humana has 25 years of experience in Africa which can be readily applied in China.

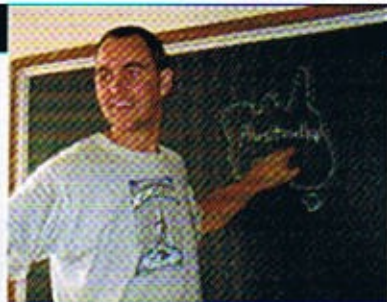
The YID is two and half years old and recognized by the Yunnan Educational Department. It is set up as Chinese foreign educational cooperation between Yuxi Teacher Training College and TG Asian Institutes and works closely with local authorities in Yuxi City as well as in the rural areas of Yuxi Prefecture. Apart from two full-

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time Danes, the project has an entirely Chinese workforce.

Volunteers from anywhere in the world are always welcome because they are needed. Anyone can just "come as they are" – the only requirement being that they be over 18 years old.

Volunteers spend their first six months learning about how to instruct in development. They thus get experience in management, leadership and cooperation. The following six months are spent in Yunnan, working together with local people towards improving their quality of life. The last two months of the program comprises



Australian Ben Nixon teaching a class in Yunnan.

information work in a broad sense.

"Theoretical skills are not enough," Axelsen says. "Half of the education gained at the institute comes through experience. You actually train to become a good development instructor and get experience by doing things you never thought yourself capable of."

One team started in July, another in September. Volunteers raise their project fees themselves. There are two prices for the 14 months: one for Chinese of 9,800 RMB, and one for foreigners of US\$2,000. Axelsen says no one has had a problem with this system so far. Food and accommodation are not included but are cheap enough in Yunnan to cause no hardship.

Volunteering is not just for young people, says Axelsen, but also for those who might want a career change or to do something for China. She says in addition to the support from Humana, she has also started approaching business circles and individuals in an effort to find ways to make money in China. As China is so vast, it is difficult for volunteer groups such as YID to become well known. They are, however, becoming increasingly recognized and loved in Yunnan as its people's quality of life steadily improves.

The YID website has more info: www.volunteerchina.org

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