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Matthew: An American Boy Doing Charity Work in China

For many people, this is a touching story- a kid trying to help other kids.

At the age of 11, he came to China alone to attend school. At 16, with his own means, he founded the China Care Foundation (CCF), an American non-governmental organization, to raise funds for orphans with disabilities in China so they can have a chance at survival and a better life.

July 22 was a muggy day in Beijing. The office of CCF at Shuangjingqiao West welcomed a man wearing a large light blue protective medical suit.

His name is Matthew A. Dalio, a young American with a big stature and deep blue eyes that carry a warm smile.

11 years ago, Matthew established the CCF in Connecticut, USA, to raise funds for orphans with disabilities in China. At that time, he became the president of CCF Board of Directors at the age of 16.

The China Care Home (CCH) is the main program of the CCF in China. At CCH in Beijing, there are more than 80 orphans with disabilities from various welfare institutions in China. They are either waiting for a life-changing surgery or have been placed under post-surgical observation.

Matthew visits China several times a year. CCH is a stop which he never misses during his busy trips.

On this summer day that Matthew visited, an orphan boy broke free from his caregiver's grip and stumbled towards Matthew. Before Matthew could bow down to pick him up, the little boy was already holding tightly to Matthew's legs.

Matthew picked the boy up. This was when his protective suit became useful.

Not everyone who has visited the home of CCH remembers to put on the protective suit, which is designed to prevent bacteria from being transferred to the children from visitors, but Matthew never forgets. This is probably because it has been a long way for him. Since 2000, the China Care Foundation had provided care to over a thousand special needs orphans in China. Matthew had not expected this, as he told the journalist of Legal Weekly, his journey so far resembles that depicted by a well-known Chinese adage- "the journey of a thousand miles begin but with a single step".

The original intention was to repay the Chinese people

In the 1990s, Matthew visited China a few times as a result of his father's work there. His impression of China at that time mostly related to food; he knew how to say things like dumplings and cooked eggs in Chinese.

Since he did not have children of the same age to play with him in China, he felt lonely and was unhappy, but things changed after a Christmas in Beijing.

Matthew became a study abroad student at the Shijiahutong Primary School in Beijing at age 11. His father placed him in the care of his Chinese friend, Zeqing Gu, who later became one of the founding members of CCH.

In the beginning, the students in the primary school looked at Matthew as if he were a new animal in the zoo. Matthew was distressed, but he just sat there quietly. He felt very homesick.

Christmas was near. If he had been in the States, it would have already felt like holiday season and he would be playing with his brothers. But in the year of 1996 Matthew searched through the entire neighbourhood in Beijing before he could find a small tree with Christmas lights and decorations.

What later surprised Matthew was that on Christmas Day, all his teachers and classmates showed up at his party. "Everyone brought a dish, and presents," that made him feel welcomed, "there are actually many people who care about me," he thought. The Christmas lights flickered as everyone danced to the music. He still remembers this scene very clearly.

Matthew gradually adapted to life in Beijing. Initially, he could not understand anything in class, but he was then able to speak in a Beijing accent. He was missing America a lot but he was missing Beijing when he had to return to America. Around that time, he started to feel that he wanted to repay the people of China some day.

He came upon some information about special needs orphans in China and it made him want to help them out. He decided to set up a charity in America to raise funds for these children. These funds were then used for paying for surgeries and foster childcare.

Matthew's China Care Foundation was officially established in 2000.

No hero but not ordinary either

Even though setting up a not-for-profit foundation in America is not uncommon, Matthew's story is still very unique. The US media soon approached him and Matthew's activities received increasing media attention; this included interviews by People magazine and the Oprah talk show. "The hero amongst us" is how they described Matthew.

When Legal Weekly journalist asked Matthew what he thought of the title, he shook his head and said, "I don't think I am a hero," he paused and added in a serious manner, "The things that I do are not usual, not everyone would attempt at it and persist, but these are not exceptional accomplishments, because everyone is capable of doing them."

Media coverage has made it easier for Matthew to raise funds. Shortly after their reports, he received thousands of emails. A well-known investment company also offered their support.

Matthew comes from a wealthy family. His father is a successful funds manager, and his mother is from a famous family in New York. Therefore, the general administrative

expenses of CCF are taken care of by the Board of Directors and not subtracted from donations. Matthew told the Legal Weekly, “My parents are very supportive of my setting up the foundation.”

Matthew believes that there are similarities between the social developments in China and the growth of his family. “They were poor in the beginning, but they gradually acquired wealth,” he said. He thinks therefore that the rich of China should contribute more to charity work.

Matthew has developed a strong attachment to China, a feeling he seldom finds in America. Once, he was with workers in the rear grounds of a factory. The workers were excited and removed their shirts, Matthew was infected by the workers’ high spirits and followed suit. And they all shouted together, “Cheers!”

It’s happier to give than to receive

Young Matthew was a kid in the eyes of China Care Foundation staff member, Xiaogeng Wang, she was nonetheless touched by his work in China, and joined the China Care Foundation as the first staff member.

Wang Xiao once told Matthew that she was working for him but Matthew told her, “You don’t work for me, you work with me.” His response touched her.

Wang Xiao had worked in the U.S. before. To her, not every rich second generation youngster in the U.S. is like Matthew. She has great admiration for the Matthew’s unique qualities. She said to Legal Weekly, “He is a great kid.”

In the spring of 2003, with the help of Xiaogeng Wang, Matthew was invited to present at a secondary school in China. In front of over 400 students, he was not at all timid and he described in detail the works of CCF.

“How many of you volunteered?” Matthew asked. Only two hands were raised amongst the quiet crowd.

After his talk, the students encircled Matthew. From their reaction, Matthew sensed that there is a huge potential for charity work in China, and that there is room for change.

Matthew himself also changed. Xiaogeng wrote in a blog, “Years ago, Matt was loving, keen, and compassionate. The Matt of today has become more inspiring and has leadership qualities,”

Zeqing Gu also thought Matthew had become more mature. Matthew would not speak of the difficulties of setting up a foundation; he also seldom criticized the current status of charity work in China. Zeqing expressed her understanding, “How would taking about these things help with our fundraising?”

Matthew’s attitude is to proceed with optimism. When he was interviewed by Legal Weekly, he reiterated that it was happier to give than to receive. “Just like at Christmas, it always brings one more pleasure to give gifts than to receive them.”

Q&A

What kinds of formalities were required for setting up the China Care foundation in Connecticut?

It is not difficult to set up a foundation in America. I cannot remember clearly what legalities were involved and what paperwork had to be filled out. I remember one of the requirements was that there had to be at least 5 people on the board.

How long did the process take?

Registering a normal foundation is very simple, and it takes only about an hour; but it takes about 3 -6 months for a not-for-profit foundation. The reason why I wanted to set up a not-for-profit foundation was that the donations would be tax-free.

Did you need to ask for approval from the U.S. government?

I can't remember which department it was that I applied to, and I didn't really care. That is because the establishment of the China Care Foundation did not involve the government. I only needed to fill out the application form and have it stamped. The only department we had to communicate with was the tax department because they check to see whether our foundation is making a profit and if the donations are expended on charity, in order to ascertain whether the donations should be tax-deductible.

You became the director of the China Care Foundation when you were 16. Did you fully understand your duties back then?

Two people helped me a lot. I had a lawyer who gave me legal advice. The other important person was my Aunt Gu. She is Chinese. After she retired, she came to stay in America for 6 months to help me manage the foundation.

Did the fundraising for China Care in the States go smoothly?

You can imagine when a 16 year old stands in front of you and asks you for money. It was not easy. Before the foundation was established, I carried with me media reports of China Care and me, and I showed them to a lot of people I knew and people who trusted me. Many Americans donated, someone donated 7000 US dollars. With their help and support, I collected the first big sum of money. Many Americans thought a kid trying to help other kids was a touching story.

Do you still remember the first project of the China Care Foundation?

We used the first 50,000 US dollars we raised to start the first program, which was to help disabled orphans find foster homes. It felt great. For a while, I went fundraising in coffee shops every day. I would tell the customers, "You can give a child a home." One summer, I saw a report of me in the local newspapers that was 4 pages long.

There are many cultural and institutional differences between China and the U.S. What is it like for a foundation that is registered in the U.S. to work in China?

China Care Foundation does not have projects in the U.S., only fundraising. All of our projects are carried out in China, and because of that, we face serious challenges in China. We try to avoid any operational misadventures while taking care of orphans. We need to discuss problems such as who is going to be in charge of the orphans' surgeries. If we had child aid projects in the U.S., we would also need to acquire permission from governmental bodies.

What do you do to make sure that the donations are put to good use?

This is a good question. I think any organization should know very clearly where their donations are going. We hired an auditor who would go through every single expense, down to the nappies purchased for the children. In America, we also had an auditor who would double-check the figures from China. If the amount was over a hundred Yuan, the auditor then needs to check the expense against the invoice. Our Auditor in America was also well supervised and reviewed. There are altogether three levels of auditing that keeps track of where donations to the China Care Foundation end up.

How did the China Care Foundation end up forming a partnership with Half the Sky Foundation?

When the China Care Foundation was first established, I realized that the orphans still needed to find a loving home after they have recovered from their surgeries. Half the Sky and China Care share similar visions, objectives, and complementary programs. That is why we have partnered. Children can be enrolled in educational programs provided by Half the Sky Foundation after they receive their medical treatments at China Care. Half the Sky is also a charity foundation registered in Hong Kong, which saves us the trouble of having to register again.

Apart from fundraising for the orphans with disabilities in China, does China Care have other programs?

To fundraise for disabled orphans in need of corrective surgeries is one of the programs of China Care. The other program is called the China Care Club, which aims to empower youth by involving them in charity work. The China Care Club network has grown immensely since I started the first club at Harvard. There are now 57 China Care Clubs in high schools and universities in America and over a thousand volunteers.

What do the volunteers do?

They help organize fundraising events. Many Chinese orphans slowly forget about China after they are adopted by American families. We don't think that is healthy for their growth, since after all, they come from China, and should therefore carry forward the cultural traditions of China. Our volunteers, who include students from China studying abroad in America, and American students who have a love for Chinese culture, help these children learn about their Chinese culture through games and activities such as Chinese cooking and learning how to write in Chinese.

What is your advice for organizing charity work in China?

I want to tell more Chinese people the value of giving. Charity is not all about monetary donation, more importantly, people need to contribute their time, and one of the ways is to volunteer. The purpose of charity work is not to help any particular person; it is to help a society progress in better ways.

For me, the rest of my life will definitely have close relationship with charity work. I hope I would continue to find my life more meaningful no matter what profession I choose to take up after graduation.