

prime-people

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They support children all over the world

More Singaporeans are helping underprivileged kids via sponsorship

By JENNANI DURAI

THREE years ago, Mrs Rachel Lim was inspired by her in-laws to sponsor a girl from Bangladesh through World Vision, for \$45 a month.

"I thought, I have three meals a day and a home. It's not a lot of money to give up," she said.

Soon, she and her husband were sponsoring three children, and on Saturday picked up their fourth, a boy from China.

Their goal: to sponsor 10 disadvantaged children around the world.

They have never met any of the children, but the Lims are part of a growing number of Singaporeans - some 11,000 -

who help nearly 15,000 underprivileged children in Asia and Africa through World Vision.

World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation, working in nearly 100 countries worldwide. Child sponsorship, one of its key initiatives, involves a monthly payment that goes to providing one child with clean water, food, education and health care.

Similar programmes are run by organisations such as Compassion, One Life, and Operation Hope Foundation.

Two men who were sponsored as children spoke on Saturday at World Vision's Child Sponsors' Celebration in Singapore.

Having grown up in poverty, they are now a Lieutenant-Commander in the Philippines Coast Guard and an oncologist in Indonesia respectively. Both men are now child sponsors themselves.

This year, Singaporeans gave more than \$6.7 million in child sponsorship.



Ms Mabel Choi (left) has been sponsoring children for 10 years while Mrs Rachel Lim, who has four children under her sponsorship, plans to help as many as 10 children around the world. Both women are sponsoring children through World Vision, a relief, development and advocacy organisation. ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

Mrs Lim said that her monthly donations took on a whole new level of significance after she and her husband had their first child, a son, 16 months ago.

The 31-year-old housewife said her husband felt that "sponsoring children is like having your own children in other countries".

Ms Mabel Choi, 50, began sponsoring a boy in Thailand in 1999, and now has children in Sri Lanka, China and Mongolia under her sponsorship as well.

She joked that she began sponsoring

children because she had "extra income", as she had no dependants.

"Now I can't stop sponsoring kids," she said.

She has met all but one of the children she sponsors, through trips organised by World Vision.

The visits quelled any scepticism about whether the organisation and the children she was sponsoring were "for real". The visits were also "very emotional", she said.

World Vision Singapore organises

some 12 trips yearly for sponsors to visit the children they are helping.

World Vision has almost 7,000 children still awaiting sponsorship in Asia.

This Christmas season, Singaporeans who want to sponsor a child can visit World Vision's Tree of Life at Marina Square or Chevron House, where they can pick a child to sponsor.

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Sponsorship helped change their lives

ONE grew up scavenging for items to sell in dumpsters, while the other came home one day from primary school and found himself being forced into an orphanage.

Today, the little scavenger is a Lieutenant-Commander in the Philippines National Coast Guard, and the abandoned child an oncologist in Bali, thanks to World Vision's child sponsorship programme.

Lt-Commander Armando Balilo (right), 42, and Dr Steven Christian (below, right), 52, were the key speakers for World Vision's Child Sponsor Celebration in Singapore on Saturday.

Lt-Commander Balilo grew up in the slums of Bagong Barrio in the Philippines, a place he described as a "dumping ground for corpses".

He would sell rice cakes by the side of the road, but scavenge in dumpsters if the day's sales were low - for "marketable junk like bottles and scrap metal", he recounted.

Often he would go to Sunday School without a shirt. "With a dripping nose, and mud and dirt all over," he added.



Dr Christian recalled through tears that his parents could not afford to put food on the table for him and his four siblings when they were growing up in Denpasar, Bali.

But going hungry was nothing compared to the day he came back from school only to find his parents had separated and left home, and he and his siblings were to be put in an orphanage.

The boys' lives turned around when World Vision donors took them on.

Lt-Commander Balilo was sponsored by Mr and Mrs Dale Van Eman from the United States, while Dr Christian was sponsored by John and Vivian Bonar from Canada.

Dr Christian at first rejected the idea, wanting only to be with his parents.

He soon came to be immensely grateful, however, when the sponsorship enabled him to stay in school, and even attend university. Both men shared that they and their siblings received university degrees because of their sponsorships.

Recently, Lt-Commander Balilo spearheaded the search, rescue and relief operations during the recent Typhoon Ketsana, while Dr Christian is one of only four oncologists in Bali today.

"To this day, it scares me to death, thinking of how my life could have been without World Vision," said Lt-Commander Balilo. "Could I have been a syndicate thief? Could my two beautiful daughters have to peddle themselves as child prostitutes? I am forever grateful to Mr and Mrs Dale Van Eman for sponsoring my future."

Both men are now child sponsors themselves.

Lt-Commander Balilo and his family sponsor two boys and a girl in the Philippines.

Dr Christian is planning to sponsor a child from Africa, "because it is so far away", as a tribute to his sponsors in Canada who changed his life in Bali.

A lasting regret for both men is that they never met the people who changed their lives. Lt-Commander Balilo said that he had "searched in vain through various channels in the USA" for them, while Dr Christian found out a few years ago that the Bonars had died in the 1980s.

But he finally found their daughter, now in her 70s, in Manitoba, Canada, this year.

"She is my sister. I told her that it was her bread that I ate, and who I am today is only because of what her parents did in the past," he said.

JENNANI DURAI

These are the stories of Child Sponsorship.

Create yours today.

Visit us at the Tree of Life, Marina Square (next to Starbucks on Level 2)