MORNING ARUSHA, TANZANIA

Tourism is a major part of the city’s economy.

Gateway to safari destinations

IN 2005, MRS MARGARET KENYI, A RESIDENT OF ARUSHA, started Step-by-Step Learning Centre (SSLC) in a borrowed 1-room house after failing to find a suitable school to enrol her daughter Ruth — who’s on the autism spectrum — despite visiting 16 different schools.

The indomitable Margaret had given up a career in science to favour of being trained in special needs education and the management of a special needs school. Within a week of its opening, SSLC welcomed Naeema and Rashid, who were born with cerebral palsy. It didn’t take long for the school to start receiving referrals from non-government organisations and charities in the Arusha community. After 14 years of ups and downs with limited resources, SSLC is now seen as a lifeline for children with disabilities.

WHERE EVERY STUDENT COUNTS

"SSLC’s students suffer from a range of mild to severe physical and mental challenges, including bone disease, cerebral palsy, autism, slow learning ability and Down’s syndrome. Most of them come from poor families without the means to pay for therapy or education. Many (especially girls) are at high risk of discrimination and abuse if left to fend for themselves.

SSLC’s current curriculum — which involves therapy, functional literacy and numeracy, and life skills training — caters to 25 students aged 6 to 35. Many students above 14 years of age have outgrown the junior programme and are in dire need of training that is more age and gender-appropriate. Despite SSLC having outgrown its current premises, there is still a waitlist of 25 prospective students looking to enrol in the school."

ONE STEP AT A TIME

Heeding a higher calling, Dr Cheng Soo May (Arts/1980) spends her retirement years edifying the lives of children with special needs in Tanzania.

TOUCHING LIVES

MORNING ARUSHA, TANZANIA

• Located at the base of dormant volcano Mt. Meru
• Gateway to safari destinations and Mt. Kilimanjaro
• Tourism is a major part of the city’s economy

HEROES

Dr Cheng Soo May

Dr Cheng shares a tender moment with an SSLC student while reading a story to him.

Dr Cheng (backrow, far left) strikes a pose with a few members of the SSLC family.

KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN IN CHINA WERE ENCOURAGED TO LEARN ABOUT COMPASSION BY DONATING A DAY’S POCKET MONEY IN RETURN FOR A SMALL BRACELET MADE BY SSLC’S DISABLED STUDENTS.

Dr Cheng (backrow, far left) strikes a pose with a few members of the SSLC family.

MY JOURNEY AT SSLC

"My role at SSLC is to apply for grants and to raise funds for the school’s capital and operational needs. For instance, the school requires a new building to house the older students who have outgrown the junior programme. Funds are also required to cover the cost of staffs’ monthly salaries and the running of school buses.

I’ve been very blessed to have met many generous souls in the course of my journey. A particularly innovative fundraising effort that left a salient impression on me was this — kindergarten children in China were encouraged to learn about compassion by donating a day’s pocket money in return for a small bracelet made by SSLC’s disabled students.

A personal ‘win’ for me is having Global Giving (www.globalgiving.org) accept SSLC as a partner organisation, allowing the school to receive donations online from 9 March 2020 onwards."

MAKING AN IMPACT

"My first foray into volunteerism was when I was an undergraduate. I was part of the Befriender Service that visited the elderly at home. I noticed that many elderly people were lonely. Sometimes, all they needed was a listening ear to alleviate their loneliness and I made it a point to give them my full attention in our time together.

Working with Margaret at SSLC has opened my eyes and heart in many ways. One woman’s grit and determination has filled a social gap in the community. Many of these disabled and special needs children could have been victims of abuse and discrimination if not for SSLC’s existence and intervention.

It has been an honour for me to work alongside Margaret and her team in giving this special group of students a head start in life, in spite of the odds they face.

The most gratifying aspect about the work I do is seeing how SSLC alumni go on to flourish as well-adjusted young people who are independent and confident in everyday life."

IT’S BETTER TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE

"Volunteering gives back to the giver manifold. By lending a hand to others whose needs were greater than mine, I gained a deeper sense of peace. I was also less burdened by my own problems and adopted a sunnier outlook. I have come to appreciate life so much more as a result of my time at SSLC. Not everyone has to move to Tanzania to start giving. My advice is always to start small — give of the available time, talent and resources you have — and you’ll be amazed how far-reaching the ripple effect can be! One is never too young, or too old, to start volunteering."

Dr Cheng shares a tender moment with an SSLC student while reading a story to him.