

Smile: Come Back Soon

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Three little words that every volunteer wants to hear are, “Come back soon!” Hearing that sentence as we were leaving the special Halloween party we brought with us brought a smile to everybody’s face: the children who said it were already happy and we were happy to hear it.

The children at Jinyuwon orphanage (진여원) make up a cooperative, and pleasant community by the beautiful Chungju Lake in Chungju, Chungcheongbuk-do. There are about 30 children at Jinyuwon who come to be there because they lost both parents, are survivors of domestic abuse, come from broken homes of messy divorces, or have single parents. I was told that the last one is most common, and about 80% of the children there still have single parent guardians so those children cannot be adopted. Single parent guardians usually send their children to Jinyuwon when they are unable to financially support their child, but they might take their child back once they become capable of supporting the child. So a volunteer should not be surprised to come back the next month and not find a child there or find a new child there.

The children, whose ages range from infant to university, take care of each other like a family so they learn to live together and form their own family unit. It is possibly the pain that comes from a broken family or loss of family that gives the children the strength to band together and form a new adopted family. Jinyuwon is a place with multiple facets of support that offers protection to children and where the children should feel safe and wanted.

My involvement with Jinyuwon started about a year ago when I joined a regular monthly visit and planned my own activity station. A couple of hagwon native English teachers in Chungju originally started the visits, but the one that led the visits was leaving Korea and asked me to take over the organizing and planning since I speak Korean and already had a leadership role in the Chungju foreigner community as a Regional Professional Development Program moderator.

The Jinyuwon visits have gone through many transformations in terms of volunteer demographics, activity types, focuses, donations, etc. Our visits’ main purpose has been to provide more native English speaker access to the children. Our group and visits have recently come to a comfortable point of volunteer members being more consistent, independent, creative, and proactive.

Facebook has played an enormous role in the development of the Jinyuwon visits. When I first took over the organizer role, I created a Facebook group called, “Chungju Orphanage Posse,” (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/127743957343587/>) so I could create events, generate more focused interest, and make it easier for volunteers to communicate with each other about meeting dates, activity ideas, etc. Visits are once a month for about 1.5 to 2 hours, since the orphanage

usually already has activities planned every weekend throughout each month. Currently, we have a pool of 43 group members (some have left Korea but were involved at some point and appreciate updates), with about 10-15 who I would consider semi-regular to regular.

At the beginning of each month, I contact one of the main teachers at Jinyuwon and consult with him which dates are best for our monthly visit. Once he gives me some dates, I post the date options on our Facebook group page and ask which dates work best for the majority of interested volunteers. Once it seems like there is a date where at least five people can attend, I make the executive decision of the date, and create a Facebook group event and post it in the Chungju community Facebook group page as well.

I will usually post ideas for a theme and ask volunteers to propose activity ideas and to bring their own materials. Being a Chungju Orphanage Posse member requires a very proactive attitude, because we will all be in charge of our own activity stations set up around the large room in which the children can independently rotate among the activities and get to experience different activities with different native English speakers. If there are enough volunteers for that month, we might double up and help each other at a station. It is quite a commitment to regularly participate in these visits, but the visits can be as fulfilling as much as the effort one puts in.

While being in charge of the group and seeing our group grow have been fulfilling, there certainly have been challenges and growing pains in the past year. The ups and downs of the Chungju Orphanage Posse have included: inconsistent volunteers, disagreement in purpose of the visits and donations, and misunderstood donation expectations.

When dealing with a large community and trying to generate interest in an altruistic commitment, commitment issues often arise. Volunteers change their minds about coming on the day of the event, they come expecting to be told what to do instead of being proactive and then act bored and/or disappointed, and they only come once and never come again. The last one bothered me as it would bother any organizer, but I came to accept that people lose interest, have different interests, and have different expectations. Instead, I deeply appreciate those who choose to come and keep on coming.

I have refused to decide activities for everybody else for the visits, because I do not believe in being dictating leader. I like to keep an open-ended forum where volunteers can bring their personal ideas and bring them to fruition. While the visits included English lessons of sorts with the original visit organizer, I realized that the children just wanted to rest and enjoy their Sunday mornings so I eventually let those lessons go and encouraged people to bring more fun and active things to do. Such fun activities have included: tie-dying shirts, sports days, Halloween parties, face painting, nail art, balloon animals, board games, general conversation, arts and crafts, seasonal activities, etc. When we started these more relaxed and “fun English” visits, the children noticeably enjoyed our visits more and the teachers told me how much the children had so much fun each time.

When I started volunteering at Jinyuwon, we brought donations of essential items like toothbrushes, toothpaste, underwear, laundry detergent, etc. each time. For the first several months,

I made it a point to ask the orphanage teacher if there were necessities Jinyuwon needed, so he told me, and I asked the volunteers to help with these donations if they could. There was no feeling of obligation that was intended, but some volunteers felt that donations should not be expected by the organizer or the orphanage and that it was taking a financial toll on them. While I argued that the spirit of volunteering usually includes donations to organizations, I understood and accepted how some volunteers felt uncomfortable with how frequent and how much the donations eventually came to be. The month after that disagreement, I assured members that these donations would no longer be requested and since then, volunteers have only brought items if they *wanted* to.

The responsibility of wanting to satisfy both the children and volunteers has been stressful at times. After I moved to Cheongju to start my new position as the Chungbuk EPIK coordinator, I felt even more pressure while juggling both my much busier career and organizing these visits entirely online. It has been nice to find the most recent intake of EPIK teachers so interested and committed to finding volunteer opportunities, and I am grateful that my position has allowed me to help build this small, but productive community of caring Chungbuk native English teachers.

The recent success of having more consistent volunteers who truly care about providing fun activities and showing affection to the children who may lack it have been incredibly fulfilling. My main role with the Jinyuwon visits is something I cannot let go of until I find a decent replacement in terms of commitment and language capabilities. It is my pleasure to continue spending that extra time and energy to make sure that the Jinyuwon children have visits from caring foreigners each month.

