

Document 19.6: American students' impressions of their stay at the Dandelion School, 2007 and 2011

Every summer since 2007 a total of 60 high school students from Winchester High School in Massachusetts have lived and volunteered at the Dandelion School, a middle school for children of migrant workers in Beijing.

Robin M. Donovan, Temple University

Robin writes about her visit to the home of one of the students:

It doesn't really hit you until you've seen where these children live. It had rained earlier in the day so it was really muddy everywhere, with huge puddles littering the ground. The dirt streets were littered with trash and bits of lychee shell. There were dogs barking at us as we passed by, into streets where tourists never venture. The student we were following looked at me and said, "Those dogs bark every morning. It wakes us up."

When we got to her house we all stopped. The student went inside, and Frankie, the girl's English teacher, urged us to do the same. Being first on the uptake, I did, the rest of the group following nervously behind me as if entering the house was something they shouldn't be doing. The house consisted of a small courtyard, a rusty old bike leaning up against one wall. It looked as if the bike had once been painted pink, but it was hard to tell. The student's bedroom was on the left and wasn't much bigger than a closet back home. On the right was her parents' bedroom, where the family would have meals and where the student's younger sister slept with her parents. The floor was made of dirt and a coating of dirt covered everything in the house; the rain and mud made it look even worse. However, this little house was still a home. It was still a home to that girl and her family. She could smile wide and present it to us proudly because it was a place of love and caring. It was her place. And through the mud and dirt, that made her house shine.

Terry Chen, Winchester High School

Terry Chen, an American of Taiwanese descent, writes of his interactions with the students:

Being curious and slightly mischievous, I wanted to see what the students at Dandelion School were truly like. When we first arrived, I acted as if I did not understand or speak Mandarin Chinese, to see what the students said about us. Naturally, I believed that their first impressions would be, “Dude, that kid is short,” or “That girl has a funny voice.” I could not have been more wrong. In actuality, the students referred to us as “teacher,” which has strong positive connotations and commands reverence in the Mandarin language. One student said, “I can’t wait to learn more English,” while another exclaimed, “Our teachers look really intelligent.” Only smiles, both verbal and facial ones, greeted us.

Oftentimes, we would play students in ping-pong on the steel, outdoor tables with makeshift nets. Dandelion students would always choose the side with the puddle underfoot or the side with the dented surface.

During the final days of our stay, a group of students presented to me an origami “pineapple,” as they called it. (It really does resemble a pineapple.) The pineapple is an interlocking aggregate of complex designs, each folded by hand, and out of the pages from the students’ textbooks. They began making the pineapple the day after we arrived.

On the day of our departure, a group of students accompanied me to the dormitories and helped me pack my belongings. Rather, they packed my belongings for me. I could not thank them enough. When it was finally time to say goodbye, many students began to cry. Although sadness and sorrow were pervasive in the air at the moment, their tears were diamonds of compassion, and the sobs soft utterance of thanks, expressing what words alone cannot.

Anthony Yu, Winchester High School

Anthony's family is from Taiwan but he has lived in the United States for most of his life. He writes of finding strength and inspiration in a Dandelion student who has faced many challenges.

“If I do well on the exam, I go to Guangzhou. If I do badly, I go back to Sichuan for high school,” Jodie explained. Her calm countenance surprised me as she spoke about two polarizing paths, neither of which was certain. Here in Beijing, Jodie’s parents cram themselves into a one-room apartment, barely able to support her education with their factory jobs. If Jodie tests into a competitive high school, she might have the chance to pursue a dream that could allow her to transcend the poverty of her daily life. If Jodie moves back to Sichuan, closer to her grandparents, she would most likely be trapped in poverty, unable to fulfill her goal of becoming a nurse. Yet here she was, discussing the dilemma as calmly as if she were talking about the weather. I wasn’t sure if I could be as calm if I were faced with the same choices. Despite the age and gender gap, I have learned a lot from her.

I met Jodie at the Dandelion School in Beijing, a school for the children of migrant factory workers, where I spent a part of my summer teaching writing. During one class, I asked the students to write about and share their dreams with their peers. When it was Jodie’s turn, she had an immediate presence. “I want to be a nurse because I want to take care of my parents,” she stated. She described her family’s impoverished life in post-earthquake Sichuan and her parents’ decision to move to Beijing. She had a strong devotion to her family and a need to repay them; becoming a nurse was an absolute goal. When I was Jodie’s age, I had no such resolve, switching between various dreams and paths based on my own desires. However, growing up in an Asian family, I empathized with her strong respect towards her relatives. Just like her, I feel the need to please my parents, even if they do not expect it from me.

When I prodded Jodie about the obstacles in her way of becoming a nurse, she just smiled and answered, “Don’t worry, I will get it.” I have reflected on these words. Swamped by memories of the doubt and anxiety I have faced in high school, I remember when I stayed up late panicking and studying for classes. I remember how at times I felt disheartened and insecure. Despite these

memories, I find strength and inspiration in her message. Her undying faith and her perspective may seem naive, but they may be our only choice for dealing with the world beyond our control. The students of the Dandelion School have taught me profound life lessons. They were hardworking and diligent. Yet, there was something I quite couldn't put my finger on and magical to the exuberance and enthusiasm the students exhibited.