

Feedback From Richard Ng

Mr Richard Ng, Senior Vice-President Customer Affairs & Service Audit, Emirates Airline, recently spent four days as a volunteer worker of The Dhaka Project. Here is his story.

"My flight EK582 was taxiing ready for take-off at Dubai International airport. It was 3.45am on a Saturday.

This trip to Bangladesh was to experience first hand, how children from the slums in Dhaka were brought from abject poverty to a life of hope by EK cabin attendant Maria Conceicao, the Founder of The Dhaka Project. She was with me onboard together with lady volunteer worker Gema Antinola Martin from Spain.

As I prepare for retirement in Emirates come 31st January 2007, I wanted to feel the reality of what is involved in charity-related work, a new vocation for me post-retirement. The Dhaka Project gave me this chance.

I land in Dhaka at 9.55 am. Bleary-eyed. My very first visit to Bangladesh. I headed for my guest house, Skylink House, in a district called Uttara. This place is close to the airport. It is near The Dhaka Project's premises.

The guest room is clean. Bed sheets, blankets, pillows met satisfactory standards of hygiene and cleanliness. For Dhs 50.00 a night, I had an air-conditioned room with a functioning ceiling fan. And this room rate included breakfast too! Three slices of toast, marmalade, butter, an omelette or fried egg, a banana, a bottle of mineral water and tea or coffee.

Volunteers also have the choice of 5-star Sheraton Dhaka downtown. A bit far from where The Dhaka Project is and daily commuting from downtown to The Dhaka Project is wasted time sitting in day long traffic jam. Volunteer workers visiting Dhaka pay for all their own expenses; airfare, hotel ...

Once I had checked in my hotel and taken lunch, I was then off to the Dhaka Project's premises on a familiarization tour that afternoon. I used a trishaw to get there. It takes 20 minutes of pedal-power to arrive. Cost? A paltry 50 fls! And the poor trishaw rider had to work so hard pedaling me all the way up and down uneven roads.

On arrival, I was introduced to The Dhaka Project's local team members, see school classes in session, meet the children, tour of the various rooms used for training, schooling, children's meal rooms, nursery and dormitories. Day 1 gave me a sense of what the next few days might look like.

Day 2. This is the morning after my arrival. The children of The Dhaka Project had assembled for the start of the day.

I was given the honour of distributing to each child, a brand new blanket as the cold months had arrived. Funds from the Emirates Airline Foundation bought these blankets. The smiles on each child's face told me how grateful they were. Every child said in clear audible English: Thank you!

It was planned that I engaged in recreational activities with the children. A badminton net was strung up and the children literally rushed to want to play with me. They are extremely happy to see foreigners, and volunteers are so welcomed.

By playing games with them, the children become less shy. They also become socially confident with the passing days engaging in English conversation with visiting volunteers. Next, it was music and entertainment time as part of the recreation session.

I had bought for the children a four-stringed musical instrument called a "Ukelele". By the time the sing-a-long session ended, these children, who previously lived in the slums in Dhaka, were belting out the tune and words of three English-language songs I had played and taught them: You are my sunshine, Sunshine on my shoulders, My bonnie lies over the ocean...and of course the usual children's songs like "twinkle twinkle little star".

Music sessions carried on over the next three days in small groups as there were nearly a hundred children old enough who could participate with me.

The rest of Day 2 saw me giving classroom walls a fresh coat of paint, smoothing out a plank to be used as shelving rack for the children's library, sorting out and packing little bottles of shampoo, bathing soap, body lotion that the children will get in a gift pack.



I was lucky to get the opportunity to do the following things during the rest of my stay:

- Visited a slum in Dhaka and talked slum-dwellers into allowing their children to begin school in January 2007 under the care of The Dhaka Project. 15 children will start school at The Dhaka Project's premises in the New Year.

- Got agreement from the Headmaster of a neighbourhood school to accept 300 street-children for schooling in January 2007. The Dhaka Project's school can accommodate only 200 children. It is now at maximum capacity. There are many street-children in the neighbourhood not in school and begging on the streets.

- Participated in "Neighbourhood clean-up day". School children armed with brooms, trash bins, disposable gloves scoured the neighbourhood and picked up scraps of paper and rubbish. This activity taught them social responsibility.

- Engaged the children in conversational English. You don't need special skills to do this. Just enthusiasm and a good sense of humour.

How can volunteers positively affect the lives of the children? Here are some examples: Education and game playing activities like drawing, painting, music, dance, children's games, drama workshops, singing, organize treasure hunts, take photographs of children and put together albums for them. If you have computer skills, you can show the children how a computer works. If you are sporty, you can help set up sports programmes. Volunteers help the children build confidence, knowledge and a sense of belonging.

You will make a real difference to the lives of these underprivileged children. The volunteer activities provide the children with:

- Better opportunities for future employment and prospects by learning basic English
- Vital social skills and friendships through team building activities
- An understanding of the world beyond life in Bangladesh through the passing on of your knowledge and life skills
- An interest in newly learnt hobbies and skills
- Friendship and integration back into society of ex-slum dwelling children

The emphasis is very much on the activities that the volunteers want to do rather than a daily structured itinerary. Any suggestions for new activities will be warmly welcomed by The Dhaka Project's co-ordinators.

What is required of a volunteer? Some helpful hints are given below:

- A personal drive to make a difference to the lives of others, and a good work attitude and eagerness to work as part of a team for the benefit of others
- Plenty of energy and enthusiasm and passion
- You need to be adaptable and flexible
- Have a sense of humour, willing and able to listen
- Be culturally sensitive, freely accepting others and their differences without discrimination

In conclusion, immersing into the life of The Dhaka Project, volunteers have a hugely rewarding experience as watching the children enjoy themselves and improving their knowledge makes the visit, time, effort and expense all so worthwhile.

Seeing abject poverty in the slums of Dhaka, seeing how The Dhaka Project brings hope to very poor children, interacting with the children in different ways - all these cumulatively left an indelible imprint on me.

I left The Dhaka Project humbled and very thankful for what I have in life and not dwell on what I do not have."