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Helping Students in China Discover Their Passions

February 18, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University sophomore Li Haoda spent the first 10 years of his life in a small village in China before he moved to a nearby city of Guangzhou. Years later, when he returned to visit to the rural village, he realized his childhood friends had few educational opportunities.

“The people I went to school with [when I was very young] were just as smart as I was, but about one in five of them dropped out of school,” said Li. “The rural schools just did not have the opportunities that were available in the city.”

The disparity of educational opportunities spurred Li to join the Peer Experience Exchange Rostrum (PEER), a not-for-profit organization geared toward bringing educational equality to China. The group recruits Chinese students studying abroad to volunteer at summer tutoring camps for students in rural, impoverished areas of China.

“We dedicated ourselves to a seemingly impossible mission: to provide resources for disadvantaged children in China, supporting their continued education to change their lives,” said Li, who joined PEER in 2008 when the organization only had 10 volunteers. “We faced obstacles in our work, such as enduring an eight-hour bus ride to a remote rural school, and coordinating multi-national volunteers in nine-hour online meetings, but with each minute devoted to my work, I better prepare volunteers, thereby helping the poor students gain more from our summer camps.”

Now in his third year with the group, Li became executive director last year. “When you create opportunity, people can discover their passions,” said Li, an Illinois Wesleyan sophomore with a double major in political science and economics. “That works both for those getting help, and the volunteers providing it. People can have a passion, but no opportunity. This is an opportunity.”

Li and fellow Illinois Wesleyan student Kong Yelei and Ren Chao spent last summer with PEER. Kong, a first-year student at Illinois Wesleyan and a native of Beijing, pointed out that the inequality in education across China is great. “The quality of education varies greatly from region to region in China,” said Kong, who noted the western areas are usually about 20 to 30 years behind the eastern areas.

Last summer, PEER volunteers spent two months preparing for the camps, and then another two months hosting a series of two-week-long camps in Shanxi and Hunan provinces in China. “PEER is great, because I didn’t feel like I was dropped into the volunteer situation with no preparation,” said Li.

Camps consist of students spending the morning in English studies. For a student to be admitted to a top high school in China, a firm grasp of English is necessary, explained Kong. “English is one of three mandatory subjects in China, along with Chinese and math,” he said. “It is difficult

to get English teachers in the poorer and remote area, and without that good background in English, then it is difficult to continue education.”

Afternoons in the camps were spent in seminars that might range from political science and French literature to extra curricular activities like basketball. “Some students have never had the chance to do organized sports before,” said Li. “Watching them learn teamwork was just as important as the required English.”

The camps provide participants with more than the skills to continue studies, according to Li. “Those at the camps can be inspired to see that success is possible,” he said, adding the volunteers also have a chance for inspiration. “Many of us who are studying abroad are hoping to return to China with what we have learned. This is a chance for students not to have to wait for graduation to bring knowledge back to China.”

Though PEER is only three years old, Li says positive long-term effects are already taking shape. Last summer, Li coordinated 50 volunteers that assisted 200 students in the poorest counties in China. “If you look at the last two years, we have had 80 volunteers helping more than 300 students. Those students now have skills they did not have. They will take those skills and get into better colleges, and return some of that information to the rural areas.” Both Li and Kong plan to continue working with PEER this summer.

For additional information on PEER, visit www.peerchina.org.

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