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Aiding rural Sabah pre-schoolers

Mary Chin

PENAMPANG: Hearing that some Sabah kids walked to schools without breakfast made philanthropist Dr Peggy Chan Wong, a corporate personality, help rural children in the State.

This time around, the Founder and Chairman of Living Hope Malaysia has raised RM6,000 from Agape Gospel Assembly, Seremban to equip three more toy and book libraries with story books and educational toys at the respective community pre-school centres at Kg Balat, Kinabatangan, Kg Liu, Pitas and Kg Kodong, Pitas. The facility is named "Living Hope Toy & Book Library".

The first toy and book library was set up at the community pre-school centre at Kg Kipouvo, here, last year with a generous donation of RM8,000 from Kinabalu International School (KIS) through the intercession of Living Hope Malaysia.

The four community pre-school centres are among 20 such centres set up by Partners of Community Organisations (Pacos) Trust to meet the need for pre-school education in various districts throughout Sabah.

Launched in May 2007, Living Hope Malaysia is a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative of Living Hope Resources (M) Sdn Bhd in Petaling Jaya, Selangor. It has recently set up an education division under the CSR initiative.

On Wednesday, Dr Wong presented a mock cheque for the sum to Pacos Trust Executive Director Anne Lasimbang at the Community Pre-School Centre cum Training Centre at Kg Kivatu, here.

Among those who witnessed the presentation were Community Pre-School Supervisor Rufina Koyou and pre-school teachers Jumah Jumadi (Kg Balat, Kinabatangan), Hani Madjial (Kg Kodong, Pitas), Mongulias Monguk and Raini Mapura (both from Kg Liu, Pitas).

Jumah, 38, an Orang Sungai, runs a class of 14 children, mainly aged five and six, at the Kg Balat Community Pre-School Centre, Kinabatangan. Trained by Pacos Trust, she has manned the centre since 2000. According to her, the number of pupils dwindled probably due to family planning. About 50 families are living in the village with one family having as many as 15 children. The residents are mainly fishermen and farmers who grow *padi*, fruit-trees and vegetables.

"It's not easy to make my way to KK from the village. Public transport is scarce. Very often it means a two-hour boat ride on the Kinabatangan River to Bukit Garam where I would stay with my sister overnight before taking a bus to KK the next morning. This time, I reached KK at

3.30am (Wednesday morning) *selepas satu hari satu malam* (after a day and a night)," she told reporters.

Addressing the teachers and media representatives, Dr Wong said it was just a beginning with the basics for the community pre-school centres.

"There are 16 more community pre-school centres to go. Pray that more donors will come forward to help us. God will provide and I will look for the money.

"I can't stop now. Hopefully, all the others will get their toy and book libraries within a year or so. From feedback, the children are very happy with the toys and books.

"The teachers too have new teaching materials. And even some of the illiterate parents are learning ABC with their children," she said.

Dr Wong recalled how she first met Lasimbang last year, saying she was touched by the latter's passion and Pacos team's dedication to helping rural communities.

"Anne took me on a two-hour *sampan* ride on the crocodile-infested Kinabatangan River (I saw eight crocodiles during the journey) to visit the children of Kg Balat.

"What a beautiful *kampung*-style pre-school but the premises was rather empty. No software, it did not have toys and books, other than limited teaching materials. That's when I decided to provide some help

"Anne is doing such a wonderful job, driving in and out of the villages to oversee the community pre-school centres. She needs support, that's why I keep coming back here."

On the proposed Education Resource Centre at a Sukau village in Kinabatangan, the philanthropist said it is expected to be completed by the end of December this year. "I hope a local NGO will run the centre as it is beyond the capacity of Living Hope."

Meanwhile, Dr Wong thanked the media for highlighting the pressing needs of rural children and the role of Living Hope Malaysia.

"Our (Living Hope Malaysia) vision is to be the voice of the unheard cries of the poor, needy and marginalised children living in rural Malaysia. Without media assistance, we would not have been able to bless 7,318 underprivileged children through our "One Egg-One Child" Feeding Programme, "Educate A Child" Programme and Special Events Programme in 11 states of Malaysia. The remaining two states will be covered by next year," she said.

Dr Wong was Chairperson of Rumah Hope (an orphanage in KL) from 1999 to 2006. Subsequently, she travelled outside KL in search of poor and hungry children in the nation.

"Initially, I only knew Perak (my home

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state) and Selangor. I didn't know about the other states. Then I began meeting HIV-infected parents, single mothers and mothers who became prostitutes or mistresses.

"I was shocked to learn that many Sabah kids walked to school without breakfast. I had never heard of such a thing in my life. I think God wanted me to hear, see and feel.

"I am touched by the plight of the kids...they are Malaysians too. I didn't realise how much I have until I saw how little some people had. I feel so blessed and thank God for this lesson. It has now become my mission to help the helpless," she said.

According to Dr Wong, Living Hope Malaysia has just launched 'its fourth

programme "One Child, One Family" Food Subsidy Programme in Jinjang, KL in collaboration with MyKasih Foundation, an initiative of a corporation in Kuala Lumpur.

"Fifty families of urban poor children get RM80 per month for food per year. Each week, each family gets RM20 to buy provisions. No cash transaction is involved as payment is made using an electronic card provided by MyKasih Foundation." If possible, she might extend this programme to Sabah in future.

At this juncture, she urged other corporations to come forward and support

families who are struggling to feed and educate their children.

Earlier, Lasimbang expressed her appreciation to Dr Wong for her support in helping to make the toy and book libraries a reality. She also thanked the media for highlighting the plight of needy rural children.

"These centres are less publicised. What is special about them is that they also provide a venue for community gatherings. For example, parents would come together here to hold meetings, activities or skills training.

So there is a sense of belonging among members of the community and this makes them collectively responsible for looking after the centres," she said.



Above: Dr Peggy (centre) presenting a cheque for RM6,000 to Anne (third from right), witnessed by Rufina (right) and pre-school teachers. At left is Jumah.

Right: Children and their teachers at the community pre-school centre (which houses a toy & book library) at Kg Liu, Pitas.

