

Holiday? They visit orphanage instead

Family group spends \$40,000 to do volunteer work in India



DISNEY World? They'll pass. Charity work at an orphanage in Kerala, India? They're raring to go. For the Vijayan family and their friends, doing volunteer work while on vacation is more meaningful than visiting tourist attractions.

Dental surgeon Vijayan Loganathan, 53, the de facto team leader of the group, said: "We decided to do something more worthwhile instead of spending time and money on making ourselves happy."

Sixteen of them visited Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala this year to do volunteer work.

They went to two orphanages from 16 to 27 May. It was their second trip.

Last year, they visited an orphanage in Bangalore, doing largely similar activities.

During the Kerala trip, the group spent time with 80 to 100 children in each orphanage in the day, doing activities such as arranging flowers, making handicrafts and painting T-shirts. At night, the group returned to a nearby hotel to stay.

Dr Vijayan said: "We teach the children life skills they can use to earn money... to get on in life if they want to."

The trip was funded by a \$40,000 donation from family and friends, including those who could not make it. The money was also used to buy craft materials and stock goodie bags with stationery and toothbrushes for the children.

The group also took the children on two outings to the local amusement park and planetarium, and to watch a movie.

Dr Vijayan said: "When we see that we have made them happy, we feel that we have given back to humanity."

While in the Kerala orphanages, the team also saw sights that made grown men weep.

Mr Nadaisan Chandrashagan, 56, an entrepreneur, could not stop crying when he saw an "electronic cradle" at the state's orphanage.

When someone abandons a baby and puts it in the cradle, the baby's weight triggers an alarm system to alert the orphanage about it.

Many team members also cried when they had to leave the children behind on their last day there.

Ms Nirmala Nair, 50, a nursing assistant director, said: "The kids there are different emotionally, and they got attached to us. They were all sad when we left, and we felt like we were leaving our hearts behind."

The Vijayan family is no stranger to volunteer work.

Dr Vijayan's parents were actively involved in volunteer work when he was a child, and they got him involved as well. They still go with him on the trips.

His older sister, Ms Santhana Letchimi, 60, a retired teacher, used to help transcribe books into Braille.

Dr Vijayan said: "We want to inspire other families to do the same. We cannot rid the world of poverty, disease and famine, but we most certainly can bring a ray of hope into the lives of these children."

Their next trip will be next May, to another part of India.

- Charissa Yong, newsroom intern

◆ The group spent more than a week in two orphanages in India.

Picture: Dr Vijayan Loganathan

We want to inspire other families to do the same, instead of making just themselves happy and buying back loads of stuff they'll never use.

- Dr Vijayan Loganathan, 53, who brought 16 friends and family to do volunteer work in Kerala, India

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- Jurong West Blk 503 Ave 1 #01-843
- Lot 1 Shopping Mall #03-18
- Marina Square #02-217
- North Point #B1-02
- Plaza Singapura #B2-24
- Singapore Post Centre #B1-03
- Square 2 #04-78/79 (Novena MRT)
- Tampines Central Eastlink Mall #01-09 (Near bus interchange)
- Tampines Mall #B1-23
- Tiong Bahru Plaza #03-19A
- Toa Payoh (HDB HUB) Blk 500 #B1-31
- VivoCity #B2-22 (Harbourfront MRT)
- West Mall #03-16/17