

Successful Religious Youth Service (RYS) project in Galle, Sri Lanka

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In reporting on the successful August 11-18th Religious Youth Service project in Galle, Sri Lanka it is important to consider the various elements that are essential to qualify a service program as a success. A key to success is in part measured by the ability of the project to have and meet clear project goals and in the process, provide participants and staff a living and work environment conducive to building friendships and trust. Additionally, a successful service project provides services that fit a genuine community need and generate high levels of community involvement. If genuine laughter and appreciation is another key measure of success, then participants, staff and community members can call the recent RYS project in Sri Lanka a great success.

A Shared Living Experience

During the RYS project, nearly sixty participants and staff from seven nations joined together to offer work service, learn from each other's culture and religion while listening and sharing about ways to help improve our communities. Much of the RYS program was held at a modern Wakwella, Management and Training Center where participants lived and ate together, shared in teams, heard presentations and reached out to make new friends. While the participants selected had notable experiences working with a variety of service organizations and had attended other work camps they often concluded that the RYS was unique and provided them with insights that would help them better embrace the diverse world that we share.

The Education Program

The RYS is a learning experience for each participant and some of the lessons taught are passed on through the active experiences of each participant. Community work service, shared meals, team meetings, new roommates, nature walks and cultural and recreation programs often place participants in a position where they need to adjust and grow through the situations they find themselves in. In addition, content based education programs are offered and often they include time for group discussions and questions and answers. These programs provided insights in the important area of character development, leadership training, good governance and relationship building.

Contributing to the education program in the role of Education Co-directors was Mrs. Ursula McLackland (Indonesia) the Secretary General-UPF Asia and Rev. John W. Gehring, (USA) UPF International Senior RYS Advisor. The duo teamed up and provided a series of presentations offering insights into qualities that shape and define true leadership with a focus placed on the role of family and the development of heart of service. A session sharing insights into the work that Dr. Sun Myung Moon has inspired in hunger eradication, religious reconciliation and good governance was offered while the RYS Sri Lanka Alumni provided insights into the 25 Year history of RYS in Sri Lanka, a time that included a period of conflict as well as a time of healing and reconciliation. The model of religious and cultural reconciliation

and cooperation that the RYS provide during those times was a valuable model for the citizens of Sri Lanka and beyond.



Bridge Building

Anxious to put words into action, the participants of the RYS closed their time of ‘classroom education’ and journeyed to the small village of Ella in Elpitiya near the coastal city of Galle. Soon after arriving and receiving a warm welcome the volunteers moved to the construction site where they would provide their work on the construction of a bridge that would cross over a small stream.

It was very hard physical work that was waiting as each participant joined in either digging and moving a large area of dirt or provide heavy lifting as their central work effort. Prior to the construction of the bridge there was no clear way that vehicles could cross over the stream and foot passengers had to step on shaky logs that at best, could provide temporary crossing.

Building the bridge required moving and laying fourteen cement beams, each seven meters long! Each of the cement beams were moved down a narrow road and had to be placed over the stream. Teams worked on digging and preparing the area near the bridge as a way to enable the bridge to accommodate three-wheelers (small motorized vehicles) as well as foot pedestrians. The activity and the presence of RYS volunteers in the community attracted local people of all ages to share and at times join in the work. It is through experiencing these personal encounters that the visitors received a taste of the life and spirit of the community one which they will never forget it.

Insights into the Religion of Others

One of the features of this as well as most RYS projects is the visits to religious sites. At the Buddhist and Hindu temples and at a Christian church the participants could tour the inside of the buildings as well as hear from a local religious leader. For many of the participants, listening to the words of the religious leaders and visiting a place of worship other than their own provided their first exposure to those that worship differently. Participants shared after the visits that these contacts were very helpful in helping remove misconceptions about others and creating an appreciation towards those that sought the light through different approaches.

Each morning participants gathered for a time of exercise and then spiritual sharing. Each religion represented took a morning and joined with co-religionist to make a short presentation in which participants could join-in, if desired. This aspect of RYS gives representatives of each religion an opportunity to share something they feel could add to the well-being of each person. The presenters tried their best to offer something special; words, chants, rituals or even a song as a way to brighten the day the day and they succeeded.

Culture and Talent

The RYS experience offers a special opportunity for people to express aspects of their culture as well as show off their personal talent. This project had more than its share of incredibly funny participants who during the evening performance had everyone laughing. On three evenings, special dances, songs and skits were performed which reflected aspects of contemporary and traditional culture. Each evening that the performances were scheduled our tired volunteers found renewed energy to enjoy the show as well as sharing the freedom to laugh without limits.



Natural Beauty

Sri Lanka offers the visitor a wide variety of natural beauty and those on this project had an opportunity to experience some of that. Integrated into the program schedule was a trip to a beautiful beach, another to a waterfall located deep in a densely forested national park. A trip to Galle which is a tourist attraction for good reasons we walked past the Galle Lighthouse and the old fort which are nestled in a neighborhood rich in colonial architecture, snake-charmers and pet monkeys. Variety filled each day of the project as the trips offered lush green panorama's as well as congested city streets crowded with vehicles, people and the semi-organized bustle of city traffic.

Some Special Highlights

On August 12, 2017, the UN International Day of Youth 2017 was celebrated in Galle, Sri Lanka, under the theme of "Youth Building Peace". The Universal Peace Federation together with the Ministry of Land and Parliamentary Reforms, UN Information Center, Youth and Students for Peace, Religious Youth Service and Global Youth Service Foundation joined together to celebrate this event as it fit well into the vision and goals of the RYS.

At the event the Hon. Gayantha Karunathillake, Minister of Land and Parliamentary Reforms, was the Chief Guest and the Member of Parliament for Galle district, Hon. Wijepala Hettiarchchy attended the celebrations as the Guest of Honor. Critical to marking this event were the 200 youth from all over Sri Lanka as well as international youth participants. This event was held at the Management Training and Development Center auditorium in Wakella, where the RYS was staying. (Visit- familyfedihq.org/2017/08/sri-lanka-international-day-of-youth) for more information.



Alumni Contribute to the RYS Anniversary project

This RYS project marked the 30th Anniversary of RYS and the 25th anniversary of the Religious Youth Service in Sri Lanka and alumni of all ages from Singapore, USA, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka joined in as either staff or as participants. Those alumni attending were happy to have a new RYS experience and were willing to share those things they had learned on various projects as well as share how the RYS made important contribution to their life. RYS alumni, Gladys Chew served as a team leader and she said she enjoyed being able to work with such inspiring participants for they gave her a lot of hope in the future. Shanta Venu Gopal confidently said that she will take this inspiration back home and help set up an RYS project in Johor, Malaysia this November. The intergenerational aspect of this RYS project went very smoothly and everyone felt they could contribute as well as grow from their event filled experience on this RYS anniversary project.

As a tribute to all the RYS alumni in Sri Lanka who have worked throughout the last quarter century Rev. John Gehring offered a reminder. "Effectiveness of service comes with consistency and consistency in offering service is a key to building trust. Reliability in service provides a path to success. We should remember that selfless pursuits aimed at promoting a greater purpose are not just dreamer's tales, they are the substance that makes dreams come true! This is true in business as well as in the field of social service.

These qualities are characteristics that have been the trademark of the Religious Youth Service (RYS) in Sri Lanka over the past quarter of a century and it is a key to the success generated in the most recent project.

