

Volunteer expat teachers turn stepping stones into milestones

Lu Feiran

In a sixth-grade classroom in south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, students sat in front of a TV. Pictures with questions in English were displayed, one by one, and in a corner of the screen a foreign teacher instructed the class in providing answers.

The presentation at the school was one of the normal weekly online English lectures provided by Stepping Stones, a nonprofit volunteer organization registered in Shanghai.

But everything wasn't quite normal. Sally Wangsawijaya, an Indonesian volunteer living in Shanghai, was leading the class during the city's coronavirus lockdown.

"We never expected the lockdown to last for around two months," Wangsawijaya said. "From time to time, I needed to schedule a time to go downstairs for a required PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test. It was quite a challenge to juggle it all, but luckily, I never had to interrupt my class schedule."

Founded by Corinne Richeux Hua, who is half-British, half-French and has been living in China for 28 years, Stepping Stones has extended its reach to about 10 cities and provinces since its inception.

Hua came up with idea of founding Stepping Stones while volunteering at a Shanghai charitable organization in 2006. Back then, she and other volunteers visited migrant schools in the city and in some villages in the central province of Henan to assess their needs. The response was unanimous. All school principals wanted English lessons for their students.

"First, it was just a few volunteers teaching in one school

in Minhang District," Hua told Shanghai Daily. "The initiative had no name, no teaching resources, no formal training. It was just a bunch of volunteers doing their best in their spare time with whatever resources they could muster themselves."

She went on: "The initiative gained traction because it was popular with schools and volunteers alike, but it was all pretty messy and chaotic in the first couple of years. In 2013, we successfully registered as a nonprofit organization in Shanghai."

Wangsawijaya moved to China in 2016 to look for a new life after living in several countries. She searched online to see what kind of volunteer work might suit her. She eventually joined Stepping Stones.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, Stepping Stones had more offline lectures than today. Back then, Wangsawijaya rose at 6am every Thursday, took the Metro to Xujiahui and boarded a minivan to a migrant school in Jiashan in neighboring Zhejiang Province. She often slept through the 90-minute ride.

"I still remember my first lesson vividly," she recalled. "I was supposed to join another volunteer who had taught the class before. But she was sick that day, and I ended up teaching the class all by myself."

It was a daunting mission facing 50 students for the first time, she said, but the warm welcome from students soothed her nerves.

The classes have proven confidence-building for both students and teachers.

"When I was teaching online classes to students in Guangxi, I noticed that children were shy at first," she said. "They spoke softly, and they didn't



Students at a primary school in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region attend an online English class provided by Stepping Stones. — Ti Gong

have a lot of confidence. I always tried to make the content of my classes interesting, including the use of animation, games, songs and other activities to get students engaged. Plus, I always gave them a lot of praise. Praise works wonders in a classroom!"

After the coronavirus pandemic struck, many of Stepping Stones' courses moved online. By the third week of February in 2020, the organization had launched its Home Classroom Program.

"It proved so popular and successful," said Hua, "that we continued it as an evening and weekend program even after the children were back in school."

The volunteers learned to cope with occasionally poor Internet connections, problems with microphones, speakers or cameras, electricity blackouts that forced class cancellations and sometimes loud background noises. But the program persevered and proved a boon when Shanghai

went into lockdown.

"We improved our online teaching mechanism and were able to seamlessly move our program to an online format during lockdown," Wangsawijaya said. "We also spent time preparing teaching materials and lesson plans for other volunteers to use in future."

Some programs, however, did suffer. The Videolink program, which teaches English to children in remote schools in rural areas, was disrupted by local outbreaks of COVID-19.

"Rural schools closed quickly at the onset of an outbreak because coronavirus poses a greater threat in areas with less advanced medical facilities," Hua said. "Children there don't have the same access to smartphones and tablets, unlike urban children, so their studies stopped when schools closed."

She added: "Even in some city schools where children do have access to smartphones and tablets, schools preferred not to tack on extra lessons after

the kids had spent a whole day in online school."

Now that the coronavirus outbreak has waned in Shanghai, Hua said she is looking forward to resuming in-person teaching and sending volunteers to rural areas again.

The private Hongbo School in Henan is at the top of the to-visit sites. The school has been working with Stepping Stones since 2014, but it's in the process of being closed and transformed into a public school. That may mean Stepping Stones will be stepping back from providing classes to primary and middle-school students, but cooperation is expected to continue for kindergarten youngsters.

Current headmistress Liu Hua said she first contacted Stepping Stones after learning of their volunteer work on Weibo. Volunteer teachers were visiting the school until 2018, when teaching moved online.

"The lectures didn't stop during the lockdown in Shanghai," Liu said.

Stepping Stones had planned to send volunteers to visit Luyi County, where the school is located, earlier this year, but the re-emergence of the pandemic scuttled the trip.

Hua said she remains optimistic about the future.

"Our immediate priority is to sustain our current online and offline English and digital literacy programs, expanding to more remote parts of China where possible," she said. "In particular, we want to continuously improve curriculum and training to facilitate an ever-higher quality of volunteer teaching. Over the last couple of years, we have become very agile at moving between offline and online teaching, so we are ready to face any challenges ahead."