



# Mapping out the World

村里来了“洋支教”

**Foreign Volunteer Teachers Take Colorful Cultures to China's Village Children**

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## Unexpected Stay

三月变三年

Alvarez, who was born in Miami, Florida, spent more than 20 years working with the nonprofit Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), during which he gained rich experiences through communication with children in poor areas. In 1999, Alvarez transferred to California. Two years later, he met Wells, who tutored children. They eventually wed and started their own nonprofit organization.

In 2004, Alvarez founded Manos International, an international nonprofit and non-governmental organization that helps disadvantaged children

Twelve children in bright orange T-shirts caught everyone's attention at Tian'anmen Square, in Beijing, on August 7, 2011. Those children were students from primary and middle schools in Gaocheng, Tang and Pingshan counties in northern China's Hebei Province. A foreigner named John Alvarez led the children. In 2005, Alvarez and Belinda Wells, a couple from the United States, visited Zhuangtou Village, in Tang County, during Spring Festival. Moved by the village's simple, naïve and tranquil atmosphere, the couple decided to stay and play a role in the local children's education. During the past six years, other foreigners have joined the team, as volunteers, to help introduce various cultures to Chinese children.

2011年8月7日, 12位来自河北唐县、平山和藁城的孩子, 身着统一的亮橙色上衣, 一脸兴奋地出现在北京天安门广场。在这支特殊的队伍当中, 一名外国中年男子格外引人注目, 他名叫John Alvarez, 是这些孩子的“头”。

2005年, 来自美国的John和妻子Belinda在河北唐县的庄头村度过中国传统的春节, 被朴实、宁静的乡村氛围所打动, 便决定留下来支援村里的青少年教育。6年来, 在John夫妇的带动下, 越来越多的外国友人来到当地, 为村里的孩子们打开了心灵之窗。

receive an education. Teaching is in English and the organization offers cultural-exchange activities, camps and sports programs. "Manos," the Spanish word for "hands," represents unity. Alvarez defined Manos' mission as "to unite the world through the sharing of cultures, ideas and education."

In the beginning, Manos' programs, which helped about 20 children, were only launched in Mexico. In 2005, a three-month teaching program led Alvarez and Wells to Shijiazhuang, capital of Hebei Province. They never expected to be fascinated by the tranquility of rural life in the region. They decided to stay longer to help educate children in the poor villages. Three

months soon became three years. The couple's son, who was given the Chinese name Yang Shilai, was born in Shijiazhuang.

### From 'Roots'

偏远, 却最美丽

Alvarez and Wells were the first foreign couple to move to Zhuangtou Village, in Tang County, to help local children with their education. Alvarez recalled how their arrival shocked and confused the community; yet, they were warmly welcomed. Wells said her first impression of the village was how beautiful and peaceful it was. "The local people have genuine smiles and are very friendly. In my eyes, children there are like children everywhere, but they lack opportunities (most) children in the cities have," Wells says.

Alvarez and Wells enjoyed their first Chinese New Year in Zhuangtou Village, where they got to know Yang Sufang, a Chinese woman who was born in that village, and who later joined Manos. In the following months, Yang and the American couple provided free English-language classes and cultural education to children in Zhuangtou Village.

Alvarez says China and the US are two countries with different cultures. It is very important to help build a general understanding among the cultures, especially in the most needy areas. "As for children from decent families in cities, they can easily learn about different cultures if they are willing to pay for it. But what I hope is to start from the 'root at the bottom.' We just scratch the surface of each culture and open a 'window' for the children to learn about the world," Alvarez says.

"For example, children in our Mexican program have never heard of anything about China. We did a camp, which was a Spring Festival celebration, for the children. Next time when they heard 'China' while they watched the news on television, you found their ears particularly opened. And, this year, we planned to teach children in villages of Hebei about Saudi Arabia, Denmark, Italy and Scotland. After learning a little bit about a foreign country or region, they will develop an interest in receiving more and more relevant knowledge, and that is education."

By sparking children's interest in different cultures — especially in poverty-stricken areas, where children's education

A girl looks curiously at Canadian volunteer teacher Linda Ehman's camera

小女孩好奇地看向加拿大志愿者Linda的相机镜头





Volunteer teacher Nini Ha with a village child. Also in photo is John Alvarez's son, Yang Shilai

志愿者Nini和John的儿子杨世来与村里一位小男孩



Founder of Manos International John Alvarez with village children in Hebei

世界手拉手组织创始人John和河北农村里的孩子们

tends to be overlooked — the cultural-education programs help them understand the world. Students who receive education provided by Manos learn about four countries every year — with four weeks of classes on each country. During a cultural party, 10 facts such as the capital, population, foods, animals and music, are introduced to the students so they can compare the various countries/regions with China.

Life in Hebei has affected Alvarez; for example, several months after they began weekly classes, a boy, named Walter, reacted to Alvarez as though they had been long-time friends; while most of the locals were still too shy to try to communicate with the foreigners. That helped Alvarez realize how much Manos was benefitting the children.

"To me, that simple 'Hello, John' Walter said to me built up a 'bridge' for me to cross over to open

a different world for the children," Alvarez says.

Tulou Primary School, in Pingshan County, is Alvarez's favorite of all the places he has visited in Hebei. Located in a very small village, in which fewer than 100 locals live, the school has only 13 students. When Alvarez and Wells visited the village, they used funding they had raised to restore the school, set up a library and install a blackboard.

When asked why he was so interested in Tulou Primary School, Alvarez answered: "Like watering a plant, you have to make sure the water goes down to the roots. In the underdeveloped, yet simple, beautiful and peaceful Tulou, I found the bottom of the 'roots' to spread the seed of Manos."

## Growing Team

力量,来自四面八方

From 2005 to 2007, Alvarez, Wells and Yang expanded Manos' voluntary teaching programs to benefit students at four primary and/or middle schools in Hebei's Zhuangtou Village, Tang and Pingshan counties. Manos' team in China also grew, as an increasing number of foreigners, who had learned about the programs from friends, wanted to pitch in.

Linda Ehman, a retired teacher from Canada, and Kevin East, an American student in Beijing, were among the 30-plus foreigners who helped teach rural children in Hebei. Although they have different backgrounds and their experiences in teaching range from no experience to more than 40 years in a classroom, they share a willingness to help support children's education in China's poor areas.

While volunteering as teachers with Manos, the foreigners always share their ideas of how best to map out programs and follow certain patterns of teaching English and various cultures.

In 2005, before Ehman joined Manos in Zhuangtou and Pingshan, she had spent one year teaching in Shijiazhuang. That was when she met Wells and learned about the American couple's plan to provide education to children in underprivileged areas of Hebei.

With support from her family and past students in Canada, Ehman raised enough money to buy backpacks for children in the villages.

"Before I went down to the village, little did I know that children there had not even played rope-skipping or soccer, not to mention played with a parachute I had brought there in my 'wisdom!'" Ehman recalls. "However, as I started pulling the parachutes out and demonstrated a variety of activities to the children, they became very responsive, giggled and joined in the fun."

Ehman, who began teaching in 1968, has come to realize that, most of the time, it is not the information a teacher passes on to his/her students that counts for a lifetime, it is the warmth and subtle emotional ties that make a lasting impression.

East arrived in China in December 2005. Before he met Alvarez, through a friend, he had had no experience as either a teacher or volunteer. Alvarez explained Manos' programs and encouraged East to begin by teaching things that interested him.

"One reason why I came to China was that I had practiced kung fu and taiji (shadow boxing) for two years when I was in America. So, John suggested my first class become a class of kung fu and taiji," East recalls. "It's such an interesting thing to see a tall foreign guy teaching Chinese children in the rural areas kung fu and taiji for over six months!"

Now, East usually treks to the villages when he has a break from classes. East says he has learned to do his best and to do what he believes is good for the children and the local communities.

## From One World to Another

### 世界手拉手

Alvarez believes education is important, but inspiration is more important. He often encourages volunteers to inspire local children and people, who represent the true blood of power, to better develop their communities. Sometimes, inspiration can be passed through to the children without words.

Wells shared with Women of China an experience, during the annual Manos Olympics Camp, which touched her heart. During the camp, students were divided into several groups to compete in various events. The team coached by Wells tried very hard to win one of the competitions; as the teammates were close to winning, Wells kept shouting "go, go, go!" as encouragement. However, the team lost.

One of the young girls, who was upset, threw her arms around Wells and began to cry. Wells hugged the girl and tried to comfort her, without knowing how to speak Chinese. "At that moment," Wells recalls, "I could only look at the girl and express through my face and gestures how she should 'be strong and continue (making) efforts for the team.' But that hug was so special to me because ... I knew we had been developing a bond with the students. It was a beautiful moment that showed me communication and the teacher-student bond does occur in the same way as it does in America or anywhere else in the world, even when you cannot speak the same language."

Wells told Women of China that Manos focuses on five key points — self-management skills, communication skills, cultural awareness,

volunteering spirit and education. Volunteer teachers and the Chinese children are encouraged to keep their minds open and serve as examples to each other as they build better understanding about the global community.

Nini Ha, who was born in the US to Vietnamese parents, met Alvarez in 2005 and, in 2008, decided to join Manos. Ha said while she was teaching Chinese children in the villages, she always enjoyed talking to them about their future plans.

Ha remembered how a girl talked about continuing her schooling so she could attend a good university. The girl said she hoped to work in a city for a while before returning to the village to teach the younger generation. "To me, it is so rewarding to see not only that the girl wants to succeed, but she also wants to give back to her village," says Ha.

During the past six years, children who have received education provided by Manos have benefitted from the interesting teaching methods and entertaining cultural-education events introduced by their foreign teachers. Not only have they developed a longing to travel to different places to learn about various people and cultures, many of the children have also expressed a desire to join Manos as volunteers.

Some of those children have become volunteer students, who help the volunteer teachers provide services during annual events, such as Manos' award trip, for excellent students, to Beijing.

Of the 12 students who participated in the award trip in early August, Hu Xiaona and Yan Shichao, two senior high school students, were Manos' volunteers. Hu, from Pingshan, was influenced by her sister, Hu Xiaoli (a colleague of Yang), who was one Manos' volunteer teachers.

"Since my sister became a volunteer, I found her English and communication skills improved rapidly. I wanted to learn from her, so I applied to be a volunteer student," Hu Xiaona says.

Yan, 17, used to be a student of Zhuangtou Village Primary School. She began participating in Manos' cultural education activities in 2005, when she was in Grade 5. For four successive years, Yan had the opportunity to participate in the award trip to Beijing; this year was her fifth trip to Beijing. This year was different, though, as she was a volunteer, who was responsible for looking after the younger students.

Yan often returns to her former primary school to help organize teaching programs. "Students who once received education from their foreign teachers have learned to give back what they have gained — either through various programs or traveling to other places — to their own communities. Becoming a volunteer can both improve their awareness and ability to serve others, and help set a good example for more children to follow," says Yang. ☞

Children and volunteers pose for a photo at Tian'anmen Square in August 2011

参加世界手拉手组织2011年8月北京奖学旅的孩子和志愿者们在天安门



(Executive Editor: YE SHAN 责任编辑: 叶珊)