

HANDA's Helping Hand

Over the past decade, a Chinese NGO has transformed the lives of thousands.

HANDA Rehabilitation & Welfare Association turned 10 this year. We asked Zhou You, the organization's president, for his thoughts on HANDA's impact.

How has HANDA* changed your life?

Before I joined HANDA I was a nobody and faced discrimination. Now I feel I can live in society like anyone else. I've also been abroad to exchange views with people affected by leprosy, which has greatly improved my self-confidence. HANDA's greatest achievement has been to help people like me return to society — and even go overseas.

What was your first contact with the organization?

I knew Dr. Yang [the founder of HANDA] before HANDA was set up. At the time, I was working in Mazhou Hospital in Guangdong Province. The hospital was associated with dirt and disorder. To improve its image, I organized people living in and around the hospital to collect money to establish a small garden and add some greenery. We greatly improved our living environment, which made a good impression on visitors. Other hospitals subsequently followed our example. When Dr. Yang was trying hard to set up HANDA, he went to many hospitals and villages seeking activists to work together for people affected by leprosy. He invited me to attend the first HANDA meeting in Guangzhou in 1996. I became involved in HANDA activities from that point.

In what important ways does HANDA assist people?

First, we try to reduce stigma and discrimination. We hold commemorative activities every March 11 — the International Day for Dignity and Respect. We do a lot to educate the public. Lately, we've been going to universities and inviting student volunteers to

get involved. It's having a real impact.

Second, we've begun many programs on behalf of people affected by leprosy, including providing scholarships for more than 800 children of affected persons. We have helped a few of these children go on to college, and one is now studying for a master's degree.

Third, HANDA has changed the attitude of people affected by leprosy from one of self-contempt to one of self-confidence. Before HANDA, we dared not use public transportation, even though people had no idea about our background. We always walked with our heads bowed. Some of our members caught the disease when they were children and were sent to hospitals which they had never left. Thanks to HANDA activities, they can now go out into the world and see how society is developing. They can even stay in a hotel when HANDA organizes some activities.

What challenges does HANDA face from now on?

One of the challenges is to surmount the big gap between our needs and available resources. There are still many people affected by leprosy who face great difficulty and are in need of help. We only get very limited support, mainly from international organizations. We hope we can get more, and also get support from national organizations and enterprises.

Does HANDA's experience hold lessons for persons affected by leprosy in other countries?

HANDA can share its experience in carrying out public education activities to reduce stigma and discrimination. We also feel that providing the opportunity for people to communicate and share their experiences is a very important way to improve their self-confidence and self-respect. ■

Zhou You



Zhou You was first elected HANDA president in 1999. He was reelected in 2004.

* See also Partners on page 5.



Part of the celebrations marking HANDA's 10th anniversary in August