

Thank You for Your Mercy

In all of our years of working with teenagers in the church in the USA, little did we realize that one day we would be involved with teens in of all places but Mongolia. This past July, Tim and I led a team of volunteers from Malaysia to work on a build site with Habitat for Humanity in Darkhan, Mongolia. The Habitat affiliate in Kuching, Malaysia had tithed to Habitat Mongolia and a number of the local volunteers were keen to visit that exotic land of Chenggis Khan, horses and camels and the Gobi Desert. They were also eager to see what type of houses their donation had helped to build.

Eleven of us made our way in two teams to the capital city of Ulaanbaatar (UB) by traveling through Beijing, China and Seoul, South Korea. We arrived in UB in time for the country's annual national celebration called "Naadam" and unbelievably it was the Travel Channel up front and in close. Throughout the 3 days of the festival, we watched both men and women compete in archery; we "oohed and ahhed" as wrestlers of all sizes tried to defeat their opponents; and we saw young horseback riders gallop over 50 km through clouds of dust in an effort to be the first at the finish line.

At the close of the Naadam activities, we left for Darkhan which is only 90 km from the Russian border. We journeyed across land with wonderfully blue skies overhead before stopping for two nights at a "ger village" where we had a taste of the life of a Mongolian nomad. A ger is the traditional round tent-like structure that is home for many Mongolians which can be dismantled and put on a horse drawn cart within 35 minutes. We were surprised at the coolness on the inside of the ger despite the July heat and, we were told, it also provides surprising warmth in Mongolia's extreme winters.

Our team continued on its way from the ger village to the city of Darkhan and arrived in time to have a "walk about" before dinner. Grey-drab concrete, rectangular buildings and apartments dotted the landscape and reminded us that Mongolia was Soviet controlled until 1989. As we walked throughout the area, we were surprised to see the occasional ger set up on the sidewalk outside of some of these buildings. At the same time, we delighted in seeing many children all around the apartments playing jump rope, "hacky sack" and basketball while adults sat and talked and watched over the little ones.

Despite our interest, all of this sightseeing was simply a precursor to our goal of getting to the Habitat build site. So as you might imagine, we were up bright and early on our scheduled first day of work and ready to travel to the area where the Habitat Darkhan Affiliate is constructing 90 houses (36 this year and 54 next year).

Other work teams from around the world had been to the build site in the weeks before our visit and had worked on eight different houses. Curiosity prompted us to wander through the nearly finished houses made of concrete and "winterized" with insulation and covered with timber and corrugated metal roofs. Each house also had a wood burning stove on the inside for heating and cooking purposes.

In no time we were assigned to houses of our own to work on and we began the task of trying to figure out what we needed to do as we worked alongside folk that spoke little or no English. To add to the potential for confusion, our Mongolian was sorely limited to just a handful of words such as, "tiim" (yes) and "uqui" (no).

Tim and I found ourselves working on a house with two local workmen and, to our delight, three teenage boys. Two of the boys, 16-year-old Aamra and 17-year-old Shinee, were brothers who were working on their sister's Habitat house while she and her husband were at their regular jobs. The third young fellow, Urtaa, aged 17, was a friend of the brothers who also offered to help out for the week.

For the first day or so, the two locally hired workmen eyed Tim up and down as if they sizing him up as a worker. If he asked a question, using many hand signals, about how they were lining up the corners of the house, they just looked at him and walked away. Me? They didn't pay much attention to the lady that was walking around with a trowel and mortar and simply plugging up any holes in between the layers of concrete blocks.

The teens, however, were a different story! They knew a smattering of English from their schooling and were not hesitant to try it out. The more time we spent with the boys the more Tim teased them (like putting mortar on their hands as they held a concrete block in place) but, in no time, they were "in the game."

As the days went by, we honestly felt we could have taken the three young fellows and plopped them down in a field in Kansas or Japan or Brazil or wherever and people wouldn't have known they were from somewhere else. They were so like the typical teens we had worked with over the years that we could not believe it. Their sense of fun and mischievousness had Tim watching his back as he worked alongside them because he never knew what pranks were in store for him. About the work site, everyone laughed as they could hear the boys calling, "tiim" (meaning "yes" in Mongolian) as they called after Tim for whatever reason. Me? I became "Mom" with the boys being very solicitous of me. If I went to the huge metal tank to draw water for our concrete mix, Aamra would run after me calling, "No, no, Diana" as he took the bucket, filled it for me and carried it back to the house.

Perhaps following the lead of the youth, the workmen began to include Tim in their "conversations" and activities as they came to realize that he really did know what he was doing and that he is a hard worker. During breaks the men would call him over and invite him to share a cup of milk from local horses and would ask the teens to translate into

English if they had something in particular they wanted to say to Tim.

Our time with the families and workers went by too quickly and before we knew it we were on our last day at the construction site. Our team had brought along refreshments for a picnic and to celebrate our time together. The homeowner families also joined in the festivities by bringing local treats and soon all were laughing and talking with hand signals or interpreters about mutual experiences that had taken place throughout the build.

The three teenagers had joined the festive meal for a while but, oddly, were very quiet and seemed somewhat distracted. We thought it peculiar that we had to call them to come away from the house build site and get something to eat and, even later, in the busyness of talking with the different families, we did not see the boys slip away soon after eating. As we continued talking with the others we heard voices calling from inside “our” house, “Tiim. Diana. Please come.” We finally figured out that the voices belonged to our young friends and that they wanted us to join them in their sister’s nearly completed Habitat house.

As we stepped over the house’s threshold, the boys coaxed us to hurry. Suddenly, Aamra, the “baby” at 16 years old, came forward with something wrapped in a blanket and handed it to Tim. Moving slowly, still teasing, Tim began to remove the wrappings only to discover that he held an intricately hand-carved “Muirin Khor”. This “horse fiddle” had a horse’s head carved on the upper end of it and string made from a horse’s tail running from end to end. Aamra had been working on this beautiful traditional instrument for some two months but decided to finish it in time to present it as a gift to Tim and me.

Needless to say, we were moved to tears by the teens’ wonderful gesture of friendship and caring. The boys also gave us a story book written in Mongolian and English on which they had written a message on the front cover. That message read:

“Dear Tim and Diana,

We want to thank you for your mercy and your knowledge that helps people to have a good home. Remember us always. We will always remember you.

Your Friends,

Aamra, Shinee and Urtaa.”

Our time in Mongolia helped to reaffirm our belief that young people across the borders are a tremendous blessing with their sense of fun and lightheartedness. With an openness that comes from the heart of the young, Aamra, Shinee and Urtaa embraced us without any hesitation and thus eliminated any barriers of language or culture or race. It is for such that we are truly thankful.

We pray that you will have a happy and blessed Thanksgiving. We pray, too, that acts of kindness and gracious open hearts will find their way into each of your lives in this season of giving thanks and...if you are blessed enough to have them coming from teens, all the better.

Grace and Peace,

Tim and Diane Fonderlin
Global Ministries Missionaries
Singapore



Ger Home



The Handmade Muirin Khor



A Great Work Team



A Malaysian & Mongolian Partnership

Tim and Diane Fonderlin
Global Ministries Missionaries
Singapore and India

Tim and Diane Fonderlin are serving as missionaries in Southern Asia while living in Singapore. Tim and Diane both work on building relationships with the local churches in Asia Pacific and the USA.