

Religious Youth Service Restores Sri Lankan Hospital

Chula Senaratne and Robert S. Kittel
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Sri Lanka - Fifty participants with a Religious Youth Service project renovated part of a Sri Lankan hospital from Dec. 6 to 12, 2014.

Working with local villagers and health care professionals, the RYS participants went to work on the Preliminary Care Unit of the Kapugala Central Dispensary, replacing a ceiling that was in danger of collapsing and restoring a washroom. Kapugala is part of the town of Balangoda, which is located in Ratnapura District of the southern Sabaragamuwa Province.



Before the RYS project began, the Kapugala hospital was in such poor condition that employees were afraid to go to work. Now the dispensary once again is serving thousands of people living in the region.

RYS, a project of Universal Peace Federation, has been conducting service projects in Sri Lanka since 1996. The 2014 service project, titled "Youth for a Peaceful and a Healthy Nation," was conducted in partnership with the Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council, the Tharunyata Hetak youth organization and the

National Lotteries Board. The participants included young people from Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Christian backgrounds.

Every day of the weeklong project started with prayer and meditation, led by a representative of a different faith every day. Every day came to an end with a cultural program, which was conducted by a different culture every evening.



On the first day after arriving at Balangoda, the participants received an orientation from Dr. Robert S. Kittel, UPF-Asia's education director, who also gave inspiring educational presentations throughout the week, including the universal principles formulated by UPF Founder Dr. Sun Myung Moon.

The opening ceremony started with prayers and blessings from many religions. Dr. T.A. Pushpakumara, doctor in charge of the Kapugala Hospital, welcomed the gathering. Dr. Chula Senaratne delivered opening remarks, and Dr. Kittel gave an introduction to UPF and RYS.

Mr. Sunil Premasiri, chairman of the Balangoda Municipal Council, was the chief guest, filling in for Provincial Education Minister Hon. Banu Manupriya, who had been delayed. Children from the village performed dances and music. There were speeches by a villager, Mr. H.N. Wimalasena, and a prefect of the village school, Diyawinna Vidyalaya. Ms. Shanika Maduwanthi, development officer of the Kapugala hospital, expressed her thanks for the help of RYS. Education Minister Manupriya arrived in time to extend his blessings the project and to encourage the project participants.

In the evening retired Director of Education R.A. Kularatne, an Ambassador for Peace, delivered an inspirational speech about his experiences as a national-level sportsman and sports administrator. He spoke about the relevance of physical activities and sports to leadership and good governance.

The next day after breakfast, the participants went to the worksite where they were assigned to different groups and were given the details of the work to be done. First of all, they had to bring down the existing ceiling, which was almost falling apart. They also had to break down the half-walls of a washroom in order to build a covered bathing area. Each participant was fully involved in the spirit of serving the community. Tea and sweets were provided by the villagers. In the afternoon, leadership education was led by Dr. Kittel and communication and leadership exercises were led by Ms. Dinesha Liyanasuriya, secretary general of RYS-Sri Lanka.

On the following day the team collected sand from a nearby stream and brought it to the hospital, where it was used for the foundation and walls of the bathing area. The local Buddhist monk came to the site and was fully involved with the work as well. In the afternoon the participants played cricket and then visited the swimming pool of the Ceylon Electricity Board Housing Complex.

On the last day at the work site, two groups, led by an expert mason, built the shower area and the other two groups finished work on the new ceiling. Then the RYS staff realized that the walls looked very worn, and after some discussion, Dr. Chula Senaratna, the project chief, agreed to paint the walls, in spite of financial constraints.



After getting the paint and borrowing some paintbrushes, the participants got to work. At the end of the day, the building looked brand-new. The staff and the villagers were then invited for a multi-religious prayer. Dr. T.A. Pushpakumara, the doctor in charge, extended his heartfelt gratitude to the RYS organizers for this much-needed help in renovating the facility. His speech made the participants realize how the hospital staff had been living in fear that the ceiling would fall down on them. During the three days that the team restored the building, the doctor saw his patients outside in the garden.

That afternoon the team visited local religious sites: a Buddhist temple, a Hindu kovil or temple, a Christian church and a Muslim mosque. All the religious leaders were very supportive and were glad to explain about their religion.

On the next day the team went for a field trip. First they visited a rocky hillock, renowned for its historic importance. It was a long and difficult climb. However, the view from the top was amazing. Later they went to see the breathtakingly beautiful Duhuvili Ella waterfall. After having lunch near a stream, everyone took a dip in the water. The team returned to the training center for dinner, followed by testimonies, singing and dancing around the campfire.

On the final day, Dec. 12, it was time to say goodbye. Dr. Kittel conducted the writing of reflections, in which the participants wrote to their parents or loved ones. The closing ceremony was very moving, with tears of joy pouring from many eyes. It ended with the distribution of certificates and souvenirs.

Looking back, all the participants felt that this service project was a transformational experience. Many youngsters were touched by the fact their manual work could benefit many less advantaged people. All of them expressed their immense gratitude to RYS/UPF for providing the chance to learn about leadership qualities and work together for the greater good of society. And they departed with the strong will to practice what they had learned in their own society. Also to meet again for the 2015 RYS project.