

On January 24th, I stood at the secure check in point at Yeager Airport in Charleston West Virginia experiencing many emotions. I watched a vice principal, a teacher and thirteen students from Tai Po Old Market Square Plover Cove depart for home in Hong Kong China. I felt pride seeing them go through security with their bright yellow caps on. I felt humility and comradery when Tany and Pricilla, the two adults, hugged me and with their hands over their hearts said "friends forever". I felt sadness as each student came up to me on the other side of the glass and placed their hand on mine and said "zaijian-goodbye". Their ten day stay gave parents and students at Southside Elementary an experience that will last for a lifetime.

The event began on January 16th. I saw an American Express airliner touch down at Yeager airport. The door was opened. Out came fifteen smiling faces sporting bright yellow caps. They were so enthusiastic and cheerful. Tany, Pricilla and I discussed our schools, food and families on the bus ride back to Huntington. They had been in flight for twenty-two hours. On arrival at Southside, our seven host families were anxiously awaiting our visitors. Through e-mails and photos, they recognized each other immediately. They went to their homes where they spent Sunday and Monday (Martin Luther King Day) before coming to school on Tuesday. On Tuesday, the students got acquainted with our school and spent the morning journal writing. At one in the afternoon, our student body had a welcoming assembly. Our guests sat in front of us wearing their red Southside Cardinal shirts. Our students stood and in unison said "Ni hau-hello". We remained standing while our Children's Choir stood in front of the Chinese flag and in Chinese, sang March of the Volunteers, the Chinese National Anthem.

During the following days, the students did Chinese painting and writing with many of our classes. On some occasions, they spent time in our classrooms listening to our teachers delivering lessons. In their schools, they start receiving English lessons in Kindergarten. On Wednesday in their school, only English can be spoken.

We are a school of diversity. We have nine nationalities represented at our school. We celebrate our difference and likenesses. I love to use quotes. This one comes from my wife Lynn. She says "The acceptance of diversity will be the preservation of civilization". Sharing our diversity strengthened our relationship throughout their stay.

Sunday evening, our school held a farewell dinner for our Chinese friends. We had entertainment and lots of good food prepared by our parents. The Chinese sang songs, played their flutes, and one Chinese student was a very accomplished pianist.

In closing, at 7:30 AM on the 24th, we headed back to Yeager Airport, which is where this story began. I would like to quote my friend, Dr. William Purkey, the Father of Invitational Education. He says, "Hong Kong people are the friendliest and most appreciative people on earth". May all of us strive to do the same.

John Hanna
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