

by Sharon Cheong

Going Home— Our Second Home

Coming from a multicultural family background, interacting with different cultures has always been part and parcel of my personal life. However, when I thought about working with a rural community, I admit that I was a bit apprehensive at first as I thought about all the difficulties. I thought of the dangers associated with travelling into the rural areas, the way of living that differs from what I am accustomed to and not being able to understand each other, whether it was the language or culture. However, a year on since I started working with the rural community, this perspective has evolved.

Entering the community

The travel books and textbooks describe the rural areas as filled with rolling hills covered with trees by pristine rivers, and endless winding roads leading to a village which overlooks a view like no other. A tourist would picture the people living in remote areas as smiling, welcoming and hospitable folks, albeit shy towards strangers. As I prepared myself for my first trip into the rural community, I imagined this to rid myself of any fear. I was excited to experience life as a true Sarawakian, venturing into the wild jungles and ready to face any challenges rural life threw at me.

Reality hit as we arrived at the first village—the journey here was all that has been described, plus more. It never occurred to me that the harshness of the reality for the people living in this part of the country was omitted from textbooks. The folks



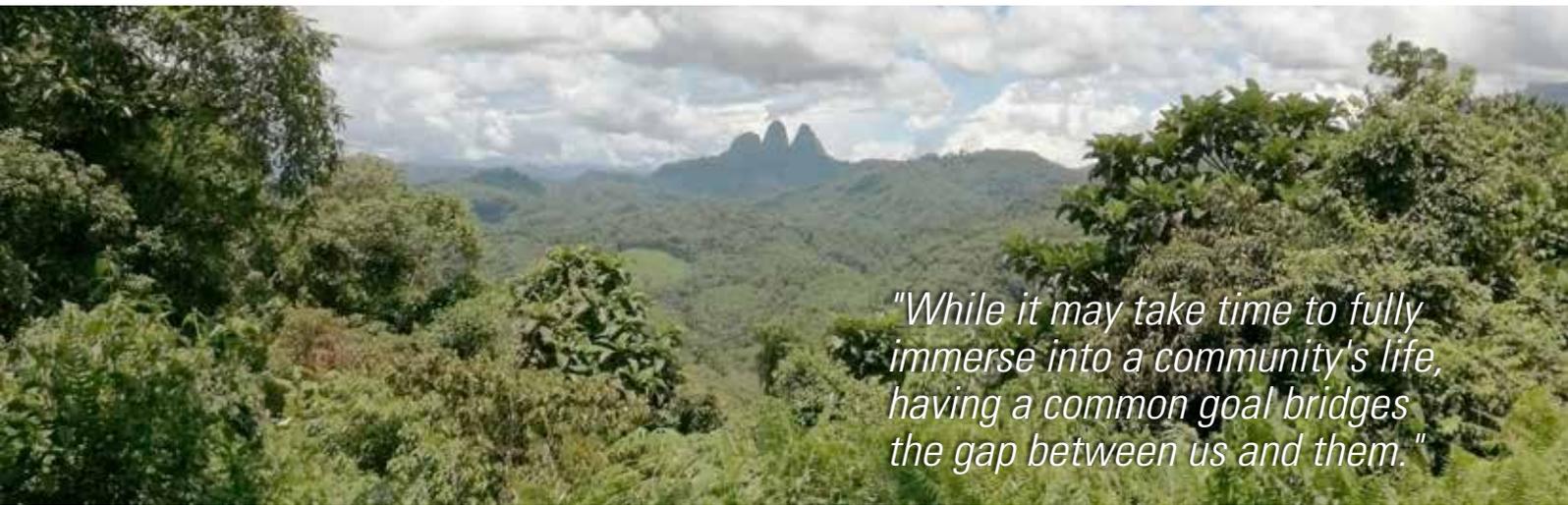
we met welcomed us into their homes, but were suspicious of our intentions. It was only later we learned that they were afraid that we had come with ulterior motives. Speaking through interpreters initially, we continued to assure them that we came to visit and get to know them better. We broke bread together, we slept in their homes, we went along with their daily activities, we learned about their community histories, we played with their children, we shared our life stories and we learned their language, a little at a time. This broke all tensions, and slowly, but surely, we were able to earn their trust and they became more than just another community. We became part of their community and each visit was looked forward to.

“Tai kempi kok, tuyang?”

(“Where are you going, friend?” in Kenyah.)

Despite the language barrier, which is still a challenge, or the cultural practices that they have been practicing for generations, I have learned to be flexible and open to these practices. I have learned that while it may take time to fully immerse into a community's life, let alone one of a different culture, there are many things that can bridge the transition. Through sharing of meals, playing sports and games, having a common goal and the sharing of the Gospel of Christ, it is important to invest time to bridge this gap between us and them for the future generation to understand that we are called to be united. Unity begins with us.

■ Sharon Cheong believes that embracing different cultures is part of making life a colourful, fun and interesting journey.



"While it may take time to fully immerse into a community's life, having a common goal bridges the gap between us and them."

A volunteer, Ps Celine Lim, shared with us: "One of my favourite quotes from C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* sums it up for me, 'If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.'"

And doing the most for the present world under the light of the Great Commandment is giving drink to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothing the naked, etc. (Matthew 25:35-36). What we do unto people we do unto the Lord. It means there is a direct correlation between how we perceive people, relate to and treat them, and our worship of Jesus.

Serving in Malaysian Care has been a great avenue for serving people living with the societal disadvantages of our day. I look forward to the day when it will be normal and expected for every follower of Jesus to do most for this present world for the least of our brothers (Matthew 25:40).

To sum up, journeying with the communities of different cultures for a year now has consistently reminded me that God's love for us is universal, regardless of what differences we have, for we are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). When asked where we are going, we simply answer, "back to our second home". ■

