

Abstract: This Peace project will connect about 30 college or high school volunteers in two cities with an equal number of blind children, ages 12-17, for a one-on-one tutoring program, mainly in the subject of English. An estimated 5 high school or college campus chapters will be founded in the process. Two regional meetings will be held in each of the two cities featuring varied immersive activities, trainings and story sharing to build up community within the program. A training package covering how to effectively tutor the blind will also be delivered. The number of hours our volunteers spend tutoring and the life goals of young blind students will be recorded and presented on the website which may allow the students to connect with professional mentors in the future.

Background: China has the largest number of blind people in the world: an estimated 17 million are affected by blindness. Most of the blind, both those from poor villages or large cities, are excluded from good educational resources: while the blind in rural areas are limited by poverty, the blind in the city also struggle with their future as very few urban high schools or colleges open doors to accept them. These urban blind students are sent to special education that is substandard and only allows for a virtually inevitable low-paying career as a masseur. The Economist magazine points out that the Chinese government regards massage as the default vocation for the blind. These blind masseurs have low social status, work long hours and are paid as little as one US dollar per hour.

Through my relationship with the blind community since 2007, I learned that access to the abundant educational resources abroad and online increasingly determines a blind individual's future. The English language stands out as one of the most in-demand skills for opportunities in education and employment. The New York Times featured the story of a young urban blind Chinese who struggled against the destiny of becoming a masseur by completing his education abroad in Britain and Hong Kong. My blind friend Crystal's journey from being rejected by regular high schools in China to finishing her education in the US and Sweden has further helped me realize how English skills can open the doors of opportunity for the blind. However, the blind community faces enormous obstacles to foreign language learning. A lack of long-term communication with peers outside of their community also makes them feel unconfident, insecure and excluded from mainstream society.

Purpose of the project:

1. To create a sustainable model providing secure and high-quality voluntary one-on-one tutoring by connecting volunteers from high schools and universities in China with young blind peers based on interest, needs and location.
2. To establish deeper relationships and mutual understanding between the two communities through long-term binding tutoring relationships, regional meetings and online seminars.
3. To train volunteers to teach effectively and according to the needs of blind students.
4. To provide a safe and inspiring space for people from both communities to meet, communicate and learn.
5. To empower young volunteers who can learn from the experience of tutoring peers and helping others.

My experience: I learned Braille in 2007 from my blind friend Jing Crystal Wu, who was studying in the Canadian Program of my high school at that time. I learned that she was rejected from regular high schools despite being a nationally recognized star in the blind community: an Asian Olympic gold medal runner, a performer of multiple instruments, and an inspiring public speaker, among other accomplishments. It was her ability to speak perfect English that persuaded the principal to admit her to the special Canadian program in my high school, which eventually allowed her to finish higher education in the US and Sweden. Not until I started to tutor blind students did I realize that what Crystal told me was true: the special education system for the blind in China doesn't equip students with any useful skills or critical thinking methods. Almost all graduates, including those with associate degrees, end up becoming poorly-paid masseurs. The language education is also extremely ineffective: most urban students I tutored could not conduct basic communication in English. The very few exceptions receive international school education, come from extremely privileged family backgrounds and can afford private classes, or are among the extremely talented and motivated, as in the case of Crystal, who learned English through listening to radio programs by herself.

My tutoring experience also started in 2007. Later, I started an unofficial tutoring program called **Blind Bridge** to connect high school volunteers in Nanjing with students in the local Blind School. During my gap year, I joined **Insight** (Shanghai) to provide online English tutoring. In that year, I traveled with Crystal and became familiar with other blind communities in Mainland China: I learned about donations aimed at career training for the blind that were lost to corruption; I experienced heartbreak when Zhengwei Rui, one of my earliest tutees, was rejected from all of the universities he contacted in China without even fair evaluation; moreover, I became familiar with the way blind people

live and the difficulties they meet in everyday life, and came to realize how much long-term friendship with peers outside of their community means to them.

Project Design

Analysis of needs: A **long-term individual tutoring experience** with a peer outside the blind community is extremely crucial for members of the blind community for the following reasons:

1. For majority of the urban blind people in China, the ability to speak English is one of the most feasible and in-demand skills. This skill can be improved tremendously with the help of one-on-one tutoring.
2. Blind students regard a **long-term friendship with peer students outside of their community** as extremely **rare, yet important and helpful emotionally and intellectually**. Volunteers also find the friendship beneficial.
3. It takes a relatively long time for a tutor to identify how his/her tutee can learn effectively. This is especially true for blind tutees, as each of them develops a unique way of learning without involving vision.

These needs are not currently met because previous assistance to these communities has usually been **short in duration** and not **based upon individual attention**.

Design of the program: To make the model effective, **four** parts will be established:

1. **Institutional chapters** that maintain the quality of the volunteers and trainings: For this particular project, chapters will be built in 5 high schools and colleges. Each chapter will be responsible for volunteer recruitment, tutor-tutee relationship support, and internal discussions and events, as well as hosting regional meetings.
2. **City-based regional meeting:** Local participating institutions will take turns in hosting the regional meetings. During summers, meeting spaces may have to be rented. The meetings aims to provide volunteers and blind tutees in the same city with a safe space for connecting, communicating and learning. The two meetings in summer 2014 will feature varied workshops, keynote speakers and activities.
3. A **website** to help chapter leaders, tutors and tutees to broadcast the idea of long-term pairing through tutoring, and to serve as platform to present the 50 life goals of the selected young blind students.

Cores of the project: To maintain the sustainability of the model, the following aspects will be emphasized:

1. A focus on long-term individual tutoring through which friendship can be maintained: The volunteer positions will be **highly selective** (for this project, only five from each institution) and volunteers **will have to commit to a partnership for at least 3 months**.
2. An effective **training package** that will be **communally built** through experience: I will draft the initial training materials with the help of professionals and blind friends. Then the training package will be hosted online and improved as more volunteers gain insights.
3. At least one **mentor** will be trained in each institutional chapter to help **support tutor-tutee relationships**. Detailed guidelines will be drafted to **ensure professional and effective relationships**.

Initial areas targeted: The program will be established in Nanjing and Shenzhen. These areas are chosen because of:

1. Existing personal connections with local blind communities and student bodies that make the project feasible.
2. The diversity covered by the selection: Shenzhen is selected because of the resources in Hong Kong.

Timeline:

1. By June, start setting up the website, drafting training materials and chapter guidelines, connecting with targeted institutions and friends in both communities and start recruiting volunteers and tutees.
2. June 24- August 5: Finalize recruitment, set up chapters, train volunteers, pair tutors and tutees, and host the first regional meetings in Nanjing (June 24-July 10), and Shenzhen (July 11- July 25)
3. July 25- August 15: Collect feedback from volunteers, host the second regional meetings in each city, update training materials and guidelines to prepare to expand the model based on the established solid foundation.

Outcomes of the project: A total number of around 5 high schools and universities in two cities will be connected with their local blind community. **30 volunteers and 30 blind students** will be connected. The tutoring will prepare young blind students to use English software, get access to online resources in English, apply to institutions in English-speaking countries and increase their readiness for employment by quipping them with strong conversational and analytical skill in English. Moreover long-term friendship will be established between the paired peers and among other volunteers and tutees that further connect and empower both communities.