

## **A Journey to Sunbeam Children's Village, an Oasis of Smiles and Hope**

Every Chinese person has an ancestral village, or "laojia", as part of their heritage. What place then do Chinese orphans without a family, or perhaps with only a father working in a factory in a distant town, or perhaps with only elderly grandparents too feeble to care for them, call home?

One place which answers this question is Sunbeam Children's Village, in picturesque Baiwan, a rural village in northern Guangdong Province, over a three hours' drive from Guangzhou. Seventy-seven children from 3 years old to 18 years old call Sunbeam home.

Two teachers from FIS, Ms. Jane Wakeman and Mr. Daren Durkin, organised this visit to Sunbeam on March 30—April 1. The group of visitors also included Ms. Wakeman's father visiting from the U.K., Mr. Durkin's son Aiden; and our family of three, including Wesley in FIS Y6A.

From the moment we arrived at Sunbeam, we were met by children of all ages who were quick to take our hand and guide us happily and confidently around the grounds of their home. For Wesley and Aiden, they were instantly at play on the well equipped playground with their Sunbeam counterparts, whether bouncing together on the grand fun that was the trampoline or challenging each other on the ping pong table. The Sunbeam playground included some surprising examples of well honed skills: one girl who could skip rope effortlessly at over 100 times per minute; another girl whizzing past us on roller blades; and teenage boys who had perfected their basketball skills, including impressive long court shots that scored.

First impressions of youthful high spirits and charming hospitality were, however, not the whole story as we discovered the longer we were there, the more we talked to the kids, and the more we observed how these Sunbeam children lived. We began to realise that the children in the higher grades were at Sunbeam primarily on weekends because the schools they attended were as much as a two hour drive away. For many Sunbeam children, a visit to any relative was never nearby and required at least an hour's drive.

We saw that at Sunbeam they lived in rooms with as many as 18 bunks in one large, well lit and airy room. The result was that these children had a highly developed sense of teamwork and the older children knew it was their duty to help the younger children learn the ways of the Sunbeam community. During the entire time we visited Sunbeam, we did not hear any children speaking to each other in anger, frustration, condescension, jealousy, or hatred. We were pleasantly surprised to see Wesley and Aiden join in the cheerful and well practiced rituals of cleaning up tables after meals, mopping the floors and washing the unbreakable and practical metal bowls, plates, cups and utensils.

Indeed, meal times at Sunbeam were the noisiest and happiest times. Before meals, the children lined up at the outside sinks to wash their hands. The tables were filled with children in cheerful anticipation of their three meals a day. Mr. Durkin had advised us beforehand that

the food at Sunbeam was “simple and nutritious”. The food was also abundant and finished at every meal with no leftovers.

There were relatively few adults at Sunbeam. The administrator was much loved by the children for his kind and caring leadership and the staff clearly enjoyed their work of supporting this community of children and of keeping the grounds clean and tidy. The children truly kept Sunbeam humming, as much as, or perhaps more so, than the adults.

To this predictable routine, our visit brought two much welcomed surprises. While it was actually Easter, Christmas music blasted through the corridors to alert the children to the festive purpose of our visit.

The first surprise was the first Easter Egg Hunt in which these children had ever participated. Our group planted plastic eggs filled with candy all over Sunbeam’s grounds. In an amazingly short period, some children soon had plastic bags full of eggs, while others continued to scour the grounds looking for the more expertly hidden eggs.

The second surprise was that we came bearing the presents that FIS parents had donated in response to these kids’ wish lists. Mr. Durkin and Ms. Wakeman took turns with Wesley, Aiden and others in presenting these gifts to each child at a special assembly. It is truly better to give than receive. All of us received more than we gave as we watched how much joy filled these children’s faces as they went back to their seats with their treasures in hand, whether a skateboard; a suitcase for the long commutes to school; a Bluetooth speaker; or some other echo of the outside world resonating through the hallways of this peaceful, generally quiet enclave.

On the morning we headed back to so called civilization, all of us carried a souvenir of Sunbeam’s magic in our hearts. We anticipated a child’s tug on our arm; waited for the smiling invitation to follow a child to sit down on a bench to look at that child’s drawing; continued to hear the laughter of children at play on the playground; and replayed in our minds how by the second day of our visit, so many children, formerly strangers to us, recognised each of our faces as someone who was not only welcome, but who would be welcomed again the next time we visit.

Our family is already making plans for our son Wesley to visit Sunbeam again, perhaps in the summer camp. We hope many more FIS parents will make this heartwarming journey and discover Sunbeam’s unique combination of well adjusted, diligent and caring children who have made this community their own special home.

Stewart Ballard  
Father of Wesley (Y6A)