

The Joy of Volunteering on Valentine's Day



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"The interior joy we feel when we have done a good deed is the nourishment the soul requires." – Albert Schweitzer

It was February the 14th, the day when my peers indulged in romantic candlelight dinners or walked on pristine sandy beaches with their respective partners as they celebrated Valentine's Day. Most had spent the day expressing their romantic love for one another. Well, four of us from the MMA Volunteer Corps (VoC) decided to take the path less trodden, as we travelled into the dense Belum Forest Reserve in Gerik, Perak, to express love of a different kind – love for Volunteerism.

Upon the invitation from EMKAY Group, MMA VoC decided to send a team of two doctors and two medical students to conduct a medical camp in an Orang Asli village in the Belum Forest Reserve near the Perak-Thai border. After our very successful attempt at volunteering a month ago with MMA VoC in Gua Musang, Kelantan, there was certainly a sense of excitement this time around.

We left Melaka at noon and arrived at the MMA Headquarters

at Jalan Pahang after a two-hour drive. After a short break, we left and embarked on a six-hour journey towards Pulau Gading, a man-made island nestled in the greenery of the Belum Forest Reserve. The Belum Forest has a land size that is three times the size of Singapore. Upon taking the Kuala Kangsar Exit on the North-South Highway, it took us another 100 kilometres to reach the town of Gerik in Perak. We were greeted with breathtaking views of miles and miles of untouched greenery as the driver tackled the winding East-West Highway which dissects the Belum Forest Reserve into two.

As we were admiring the beauty of the forest, the driver informed us that we might be able to see herds of elephants crossing the road as it was a common sight amongst locals in Pulau Gading. Sadly, luck was not on our side that day as the elephants managed to evade our sight.

As the sun began to set, we eventually arrived at our destination, Belum Forest Resort, owned by EMKAY Group. We were taken aback by the world-

class facilities in this resort. I wondered to myself why such a resort, coupled with such a scenic rainforest around, had not managed to capture the attention of the Malaysian public. It remains an 'undiscovered' paradise.

As the journey took the winds out of our sails, we called it a day and headed straight to bed to recharge our batteries for the medical camp the next day. As the sun rose the following day, we were awakened by nature's alarm clock, the sounds of birds chirping and the flapping of their wings as they flew by.



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After a hearty breakfast, the gruelling trip to Kampung Semelor where 80 Orang Asli families resided, beckoned. The multipurpose vehicle that we came in the day before was deemed unsuitable for the trip to the village and a 4-wheeldrive (4WD) truck was used instead. Half an hour into the trip, I understood why the change in our mode of transportation was deemed necessary. The driver had to put the truck into 4WD mode as we moved along the dirt road which led to the village. The village was surrounded and lined with electric fences to prevent elephants from entering and causing immense damage. We saw fresh elephant dung along the way but not the elephants.

We were impressed with our driver as he displayed masterly driving skills while manoeuvring through the hills that included steep climbs where any minor misjudgement on his part would have seen us tumbling into the deep ravines that lay just a metre or two from the road.

We finally arrived at the village at 10.00am and were welcomed with open arms by the 'Tok Batin', the term used to refer to the Head of the Orang Asli. He directed us towards their newly-built multipurpose hall, to set up the medical camp. While preparing, we could see that all the villagers, from toddlers to the elderly, were excited. They began sauntering into the hall and waited patiently to be attended by us.

One of the staff who accompanied us from the hotel mentioned that the excitement amongst villagers was palpable as they rarely have visitors from outside. This was the first time a medical camp was

being conducted in their vicinity. After all preparations were set, a continuous stream of villagers came in to be screened by us. Most of the adults were screened for diabetes and hypertension. It was alarming to see that almost all in the geriatric age group had high blood pressure or raised blood glucose readings. Surprisingly and unfortunately, they had never sought medical attention prior to this. The volunteer doctors advised them on their health status and provided them with the necessary referral letters to Government Clinics.

The next group of villagers that came were the housewives and their kids. Those with minor ailments were treated with the required medication. At the tail-end of our session, we attended to the kindergarten children who came along with their teachers after school. They were all given deworming tablets as most showed some form of malnutrition, while some others suffered from severe forms. They were provided

with adequate supplements for a month. The doctors then educated the kindergarten teachers about the balanced diet required by the kids and also provided them with supplements to be given during recess time at school.

We finally wrapped-up the camp at 4.00pm, after screening and treating close to 90 villagers. As we were leaving the village, all the villagers gathered at the entrance to send us off while the Chieftain showered us with words of thanks and gratitude for the services rendered. He also requested that we come back again and cheekily remarked that we should bring female doctors next time as this time the volunteers were an all-male team. Watching the villagers wave us goodbye, some with tearing eyes, provided us with the impetus to continue volunteering and spreading the message of love and care amongst humans.

It was a Valentine's Day well-spent, a memorable 'love' rendezvous with the Orang Asli.



Conducting blood pressure examination on a housewife



VoC Advisor, Dato' Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan, performing a check-up on a villager



Deworming session with kindergarten children



Preparations for the medical camp