The International High School Youth Volunteers Conference aims to take young people out of their comfort zones and transport them across the world to do good

Taiwanese volunteers teach kids in Swaziland computer skills while on a 10-day tour during the summer holidays.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF LEWIS LU

Would you walk by on the other side?

BY **IAN BARTHOLOMEW**
STAFF REPORTER

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>
> — Albert Tang, volunteer

Earlier this year, Albert Tang (唐樺岳), a 17-year-old student at National Changhua Senior High School (國立彰化高級中學), traveled to Swaziland as a volunteer for 10 days to teach children computer skills. What he saw on that trip changed him profoundly.

"I had worked with poor people in Taiwan," he said in a phone interview on Sunday, "but what I saw in Swaziland was a totally different type of poverty."

He said he now finds racial prejudice totally unacceptable. "I try to explain what I experienced, and they [his contemporaries] have stopped making jokes [about black people]," he said.

Tang was part of a group of Taiwanese students from Changhua Senior High School who visited the kingdom with Lewis Lu (呂興忠), the school's library director and the chief organizer of the Change the World: International High School Youth Volunteers Conference (青年志工的夢想與實踐), which is being held at the school this week as the main event of the International Globalization Conference for High School Students on Intercultural Understanding (2008國際高中青年文化會議).

The event was organized to coincide with International Volunteer Day, which falls on Friday, and aims to encourage young people from prosperous nations to step out of their comfort zones. Janine Maxwell, the founder of Heart for Africa, an organization that works extensively with orphans in Africa, met Lu while in Swaziland this year and has been invited as a keynote speaker for the conference.

Maxwell, whose own commitment to aid work in Africa came relatively late, runs a program in which American high school kids interested in volunteer work are given a chance to experience hands-on aid work in Africa. Before launching Heart for Africa, Maxwell led the Onyx Marketing Group, a major PR company in Canada. A meeting with a street kid in Lusaka during a trip to Zambia changed all that. She wanted to help: "I felt that this was my mission in life. I am here to rescue this child and being a businessperson and having influence and wealth I can fix this, because I was arrogant and didn't know any better. ... I will fix this, then I can go back home, to my business, my life, my family and the world will be good. But [the situation] is not fixable."

As she learned more about the vicious cycle of poverty and disease that leaves millions of kids fending for themselves on the streets of cities such as Lusaka and Nairobi, Maxwell's Christian faith prompted her to dedicate her time, energy and business acumen to helping those less fortunate than herself. A major part of this process is bringing people to Africa to see the reality on the ground, giving them a transformative experience that motivates them to do something about the situation, in the way that her own meeting with one child on the streets of Lusaka changed her life.

Maxwell estimates that Heart for Africa has brought over 4,000 people to Swaziland and Kenya over the past four years, mostly on short stays of around 10 days, but some for as long as a month. Volunteers are given simple tasks such as planting vegetable gardens, setting up fences and building shelters.

"The kids are real work horses," Maxwell said. "That's the beauty about having a bunch of young, strong backs out there ... They are working side-by-side [with the local people], Africans and North Americans. It was really good for the Africans to see the Americans get dirty, because historically we white folk have gone in and said 'that's how you do it.'

"Many [of the people we take over] are quite fearful. I would say that 75 percent of the people who travel with us have never had a passport, so these are not world travelers. These may be people who have never left their own state, but it is like they are hearing a call in the heart. This is not a mental choice for most people, it's a heart call. They say, 'I do have a lot, I have more than I need.'"

For Tang, although he didn't get muddy digging holes for fence posts, he experienced his own revelations. "We had gone intending to teach them about using the Internet," he said, "but when we got there, we found there wasn't any Internet connection. That totally messed up our plans."

Discovering how other people live is the first step to making a difference. The title of the conference is Change the World, and while many of the students, in essays submitted as part of their application to participate in the conference, see their role as benevolent helpers to those in need, Rachel Smoltz, 14, from King's Ridge Christian High School, Georgia, who was with Maxwell in Swaziland this

Top: Janine Maxwell, left, founded Heart for Africa after meeting a street kid in Lusaka, Zambia.
Above: Rachel Smoltz says the experience of volunteering in Swaziland changed her life.

PHOTOS : COURTESY OF HEART FOR AFRICA

summer, saw things a little differently.

"First of all, when I traveled to Africa I thought I would be the one teaching them about education, and about God's love and showing them love and being there for them. And I was really surprised because I felt that I didn't really teach them a lot, but they changed my life. When I got back to America it felt like they had changed me much more than I had changed them," Smoltz said.

"I would feel wrong if I went over there and saw what was happening and saw the pain and the suffering and came back and did nothing," said Maggie Taylor, 17, of North Forsyth High School, Georgia, who has volunteered in Kenya three times and in Swaziland once, and is active in fundraising for African aid.

Maxwell said the group has had enormous success with many first time travelers, who after the initial trip want to renew their commitment. "We have had a great response," Maxwell said, "to the extent that we are the bottleneck. We have a lot of people who want to volunteer long term, but we are not set up for that yet ... Many people will come back and start fundraising for projects once they have gone and seen the need."

The 2008 Change the World: International High School Volunteers Conference opened yesterday. Maxwell was the keynote speaker. The event brings together 35 students from 10 schools in seven countries, all of whom have participated in volunteer work. The conference runs until Dec. 7.

Doctors fear the rise of 'cyberchondria'

I'm sorry, Doctor Internet, but I want a second opinion

BY **JOHN NAUGHTON**
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

In the fall of 2000 I spoke at a seminar in a big US research hospital on the Internet and its impact on health care. Another participant was a senior scientist from the National Institute of Health, the US federal medical research agency. He was asked what he saw as the biggest challenge for health professionals over the next 10 years. "The biggest problem," he replied quietly, "will be how to cope with Internet-informed patients." The audience (mainly health professionals) laughed appreciatively and went about their daily business.

They might have been less amused if they'd realized what was going on even as the seminar was taking place. In November that year, the Pew Internet and American Life survey found that 55 percent of Americans with Internet access were using the network to get health information. At the time, that corresponded to 52 million people. Two years later the number was up to 73 million. I'm pretty sure that trend has continued. A detailed academic study some years ago estimated that 4.5 percent of all Internet searches were health-related, which at the time translated into 16.7 million health-related queries a day. Again, I'm sure that number has gone up.

All of which suggests that people worry a lot about their health and see the Web as a great way of becoming better informed. The medical profession is, to put it mildly, not over the moon. The more literate practitioners shake their heads and quote Mark Twain's adage: "Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint." But others are more righteous and wax indignant about what they see as the errors and misinformation peddled by many sites that purport to deal with health issues.

It's tempting to regard this as the blustering of an elite threatened with the kind of "disintermediation" that has wiped out travel agents. But quite a few studies suggest that the quality of Web health information is pretty variable. For instance, several estimate that about 5 percent of sites dealing with cancer are inaccurate, while those dealing with nutrition are especially suspect.

But there is a lot of really good stuff on the Web and many doctors see it as a force for good. It can transform patients from being passive recipients of health services and encourage them to become more active participants. And it can sometimes aid the diagnostic process, because the patient has thought more about symptoms beforehand. For those and other reasons (including excellent US resources such as www.pubmed.gov), I've always thought that Dr Internet was, on the whole, a good thing.

I still think that, but a report by Microsoft Research in Redmond suggests the picture is more complicated. In *Cyberchondria: Studies of the Escalation of Medical Concerns in Web Search* (available as a PDF download from bit.ly/15Q9h) it claims that "the Web has the potential to increase the anxieties of people with little or no medical training, especially when web search is employed as a diagnostic procedure." The finding is based on a large-scale study of search-engine logs showing how people seek medical information online, checked against a conventional survey of 515 individuals' health-related search experiences.

The Microsoft researchers focused on the extent to which common, probably innocuous symptoms can escalate into the perusal of Web pages on serious, rare conditions that are linked to the common symptoms. By "escalation" they mean the process by which a query about "headache" brings up a (reputable) Web page that mentions they can sometimes be symptomatic of a brain tumor (which is true). This leads to a frenzied search on topics such as "brain tumor treatment" and results in a terrified user starting to think about drawing up a will.

The research suggests search engines have the potential to escalate medical concerns. This is partly because they were never designed to be diagnostic tools and partly because reputable Web pages always provide comprehensive listings of possible diseases linked to specific symptoms. But cyberchondria is probably mainly a product of users' predisposition to escalate rather than settle for more reasonable explanations.

The moral? If you're a hypochondriac, stay off the Web. And remember that, as the man said, the best cure for your condition is to forget about your body and become interested in somebody else's.

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Seeking health advice online can cause patients unnecessary anxiety.

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