

## Let the Poor Kids Fly

*Translation of an interview with XSEL CEO, Ms. Fredy Bush, published in Hong Kong Economic Journal (P31, Supplement, January 5, 2009)*

There are always some temporary emotional downturns after festivals, as after all the excitement we tend to draw in our landscape. Coming back to the work stations, we have to face the difficulties again and that is exactly when we need to hear some inspiring stories.

Our story today is about Fredy Bush, CEO of Xinhua Sports and Entertainment Limited and the head of two charities, Xinhua Library Foundation and Chazara Foundation. Besides her, it is also a story about a bunch of kids.

“What about your own children?” I ask. Fredy looks no more than 40 years old and I assume her children are just teenagers who need a lot of care. I wonder why she spends all her leisure time writing to the children she helps rather than looking after her own.

“My son’s already 30 years old. I became a mother when I was a teenager, which to me was unfortunate but fortunate as well. They are grown-ups who don’t need me taking care of them any more. Instead, they sometimes give me a hand on Chazara!”

### **Persistence Coming from Humiliation**

Fredy is a single mom with a son and a daughter.

She was married and had two children at nineteen. One year after the marriage, Fredy’s husband died in a motorcycle accident.

The accident left her out of school with two young kids. She used to work in fast-food restaurants and work in university filing medical records. In 1985, she moved to Taiwan to work as a translator for a company supervisor and that’s when her life started to change.

Sitting in front of me, Fredy is dressed in black business skirt. Everyday her job relates to complicated data and enormous amount of news and information, however with only high-school education background, her knowledge base was all built on her daily effort. She knew in her early days already that knowledge drives life changes.

“Kids were young and went to bed early. I managed to make use of the time at night for reading. I started with buying English and Math textbooks and gradually got to History and Literature, with which my mind was broadened.”

“What was it that enabled you to stay up late and read?”

“When you are struggling with life and being humiliated everyday, naturally you’ll get disciplined. Looking at my two kids, I realized it was my choice to have them at the first place and being poor shouldn’t be their only option. I can’t be selfish and leave them in poverty with me.

“How bad was your life then?”

“Government wouldn’t let you starve after all. They offered you food stamps to buy food and necessities. In the US, not a lot of people like food stamps especially for supermarket cashiers as it put them through a lot of extra trouble and it’s a waste of time. When you used food stamps, it took longer and people in queue would then know you were too poor to afford food. It was very embarrassing.”

“I remember once I was checking out in a supermarket and realized I did not have enough food stamps, therefore the cashier had to cancel the items one by one. It was a fussy process and the cashier started scolding in a rude way. My son was in tears when he saw me being humiliated.”

She can still remember vividly how she felt. Experiences from the tough time made her sensitive for people under privilege.

A magazine on the plane changed the life of many children.

“I read a report on the plane where it said 100 dollar could pay for a child’s schooling. I made up my mind to help those children as I thought 100 dollar might only be enough to buy me a dinner. In order to make sure it was real, I asked my assistant to get in touch with the editor and visited the area in person.”

“It wasn’t enough by just reading their story. You will only be astonished when you see it with your own eyes. I visited this small village in Ningxia. The average income per person was 240 dollar and how do you expect them to afford their children’s education? Even if they could afford it, they would only pay for the boys. According to the local custom, parents will arrange marriage for girls who don’t continue to high school. That way, the girls will never get rid of poverty and it became a bad cycle.”

It reminded her of her own experience and that was when she established Charaza Foundation to help these children.

Chazara is a type of butterfly in the Mongolian mountains. The logo consists of four finger prints meaning everyone has their special Chazara symbol and every child needs to rely on their own effort to finally fly high in the sky.

Chazara started with sponsoring girls only and now they have included boys in the project. Children all call Fredy “Mom Bush” and write to Fredy in Chinese as they don’t speak English. “My assistant will put kid’s photo next to the letter so I can remember their names and what’s happening with them. I want every letter to look individual and special.”

Mum Bush now has more than 1000 children, between 200 and 300 of who write to her regularly. She writes back to 20 some children every week.

### **Knowledge Brings Hope**

There is a boy who is Fredy’s favourite. This boy lives with his blind grandmother, who tried everything to borrow money for his schooling. What impressed Fredy was the boy always being “unbelievably” positive and happy and thinking everything is possible in this world.

Hope is important to Fredy. In the US, she used to be poor; In China, she sees poverty. In the US, it was relative poverty; In China, it is absolute poverty. As us in Hong Kong, you might

think “relative poverty” might make people unhappy as we have the well-offs around as contrast. While in the mountains in mainland China, everyone is poor and maybe they don’t care as much. Fredy doesn’t agree so.

“In the US, you know your life will be improved if you have a degree. But in China, I was told they don’t know how to get out of poverty and they don’t see hope except from schools. In the US, you can at least see hopes as the country believes everything can be done there. But in Ningxia, I don’t see them with this belief.”

It is vital to bring hope to poverty, but bringing knowledge seems the best practice. However more people tend to lose belief in knowledge as some people are making a fortune by selling knowledge. In fact, knowledge is no more than something that broaden your mind and make you rich inside. Meanwhile, during this difficult time, it shouldn’t be the investment from mainland, or God. What we need is knowledge.

### **Head of the Village Library**

There is another man who believes knowledge brings hope and gets people out of poverty.

Xinhua Library Foundation started to build and stock libraries three years ago, with the aim to provide people in remote areas with opportunities to access knowledge and self-learning. Ningxia is a Muslim area where men are superior. When Fredy and her team plan to build a library, they have to be introduced by the head of another village. One after another, the Foundation now has built four libraries, of which three in Ningxia and the other in Inner Mongolia.

How did she meet her “first man”?

One of the kids in Chazara project told me in the letter a story about the head of a village that turned his home into a library and built a basketball court with his own money. However he could not afford any sports equipment. As soon as I read the letter, I contacted the principal of the child’s school, through whom I got to know this man.

His name is Li Chenglin, the head of Cangwan Village in Haiyuan County. Li Chenglin has now become a celebrity who received rewards from the government and interviews from media. Fredy described Li Chenglin as someone who is extremely eager to get knowledge and that has inspired everyone including her.

The first time she met Li Chenglin, it was in the library he built in the biggest room in his house, occupying more than 100 m<sup>2</sup> with hundred books. To build it, Li Chenglin had to borrow 10,000 Yuan and sacrifice his two daughters’ high school education. Back then, Li Chenglin had an annual income of 1400 Yuan.

Meeting him, Fredy made the commitment of building library, adding books and sports equipment. Li Chenglin cooked for Fredy and the team, who “don’t need too much food”, the best dinner they could by borrowing food from his neighbors.

“You can not be untouched in front of Li Chenglin’s sincerity.”

There came Fredy’s idea of having Christmas parties in Beijing and Shanghai, where each guests was asked to bring two books with them as donation. That way she collected more than

1000 different books for Li Chenglin.

Li Chenglin still makes 1400 Yuan a year, but with the 10,000 debt paid off. His daughters are in high schools while he has more than 1000 books in his library with a fully equipped basketball court. Most importantly, he offers indirect access to knowledge for people in neighboring villages.

Being disadvantaged, he has at least had one of his tiny wishes realized. He is already rich and wealthy.