

Sailing to Confidence: From Dreams to Reality

On the last night of my journey aboard the *Jockey Club Huan*, I was lying back onto the wooden third floor deck, quietly observing the serenity of the night sky. The sun had just disappeared behind the mountains, and I was disappointed to see the hovering clouds in the darkness. With the encouragement of Chung Ge, I had grown to enjoy star-gazing during my time on the *Jockey Club Huan*. Though the view of the stars were unobstructed by city lights in the suburbs of America, I had never taken the time to notice the beauty of these faraway dots. In Hong Kong, however, I learned not only to investigate and explore what was unknown to me, but also to delve deeper into things I saw on a daily basis.

From the beginning, I found the demands of the internship extremely challenging. The assignments themselves were not difficult; making a promotional package and updating the website were tasks that those with proficiency in photo-editing and writing could easily accomplish. The problem laid in answering the questions my supervisor, Stella Ho, posed early on to our team: "What is the organization's niche? How does this organization affect the lives of participants? Why should people join Adventure-Ship?" Though I had my guesses on why people would want to enroll in the program, I never anticipated the lasting impact of Adventure-Ship on the disabled and the disadvantaged participants. Students who did not know how to swim told me how they braved their fears and jumped into the South China Sea. A young girl told me that this experience made her recognize how she magnified obstacles in her head. The hardest part, she declared, was standing on the ship deck, summing up the courage to propel from safe lands, and dive into the unknown. A teacher reported that a student stopped self-mutilating because of her enrollment in Adventure-Ship, and even found the courage to enter a school-wide singing contest, something the previously under-confident girl would never have done. These anecdotes told me that Adventure-Ship taught more than knot-tying skills on a ship to students for a day or two; it guides students to learn that an obstacle can be overcome as long as one can muster up the courage to face it head-on.

Hong Kong provides a lot of assistance to the disabled who do want to conquer their physical limitations. Having returned to Hong Kong numerous times since my emigration to the United States, I had already marveled at the tall skyscrapers, the technologically advanced Octopus card, and the number of mega-malls at practically every corner. But though I had been to many places in Hong Kong, I felt that through this internship, I was seeing the city for the first time. It was only this year that I noticed how every MTR station had patterns on the floor to guide the blind, wheelchair-accessible elevators, and wheelchair-accessible cars on the train. These provisions help the disabled lead more independent lives. Talking to a number of blind people while researching how to make our website blind-accessible, I was struck by their intelligence, motivation, and friendliness. They recognized their capabilities were more limited than people with sight, yet their handicap did not prevent them from finding ways to accomplish everyday tasks. Golf and cooking are activities I never imagined blind people to engage in, yet I saw many learning how to do both.

Before I began this internship, I too worried that I would not be able to overcome cultural obstacles. Though I was born in Hong Kong and often returned to visit my family, my Western thoughts and actions betray my Chinese looks. I wondered whether people would treat me like a foreigner or a local, and I wasn't sure which label was preferable. With the guidance of my supervisor, I slowly learned that it did not matter how others viewed me; it was more important how I viewed myself. Similarly, participants who entered the Buddies program were not

differentiated by able or disabled. All participants helped and learned from each other, since most have had limited experiences on a sailing junk. They did not allow their labels to define their capabilities; I discovered that I didn't need to categorize myself, either.

I also worried that I would not be physically apt for this internship. Admittedly, I engaged in indoor activities far more than outdoors back in the United States, and wanted to challenge myself. The problems I foresaw, such as motion sickness, were easy to combat, since I bought the drugstore's entire supply of motion sickness pills, as well as some recommended by Chinese medicine stores. It was the little things, such as walking from the bus station to the office in the humid, sweltering heat, being shoved up against a subway car full of strangers during rush hour, and learning how to live in a city for an extended period of time without a car handy, that truly tested me.

What I learned most about myself was how to keep my disabilities within perspective, whether they be physical impediments I have no control over, or mental blocks that manifest over time and trials. I had grown up with a physical impairment, and had often thought that it would prevent me from engaging in certain activities. When I was younger, I used to berate myself for these differences, and sit idly instead of finding ways to accommodate them. The exposure to people with crippling disabilities and yet, the willingness to endure and continue maintaining as normal a lifestyle as possible made me realize that though I might not be able to change my condition, I could certainly learn to live with them and engage in the fullest life possible despite these problems. Through these struggles, I discovered that I was more strong-willed than I had originally given myself credit for, and that these qualities could only emerge when one is enduring troubles.

Three hours have passed since I began my stargazing on the deck. The clouds were beginning to part, and I searched for the stars Altair and Vega, named Cowherd and Weaving Maiden in Chinese myths. The two are separated by the Milky Way, a river of stars that prevents Cowherd from being with his true love. When the two stars do get together once a year, on the 7th day of the 7th month of the Lunar Calendar, it is celebrated as the Chinese Valentine's Day. Though Cowherd's dreams are restricted by a river, I am lucky that the *Jockey Club Huan* and *Adventure-Ship* have helped me sail to my destination, taught me to endeavor, and gave me a great opportunity to learn. Thank you very much to the Hong Kong Jockey Club for this experience; the lessons I learned will carry with me for a lifetime.