

## Crazybake

March 07, 2006 - by Gareth George, Photo by Roger Red

"You want to do what? Managing the German Kindergarten is not enough?" Wang Xin asks his wife. Yvonne, steps over a coloring book, packing her bag.

"Could you imagine living in Beijing and having nothing to do everyday?" she asks. He couldn't. She couldn't. She's about to trot out. Past the white condos, the Kempinski hotel, the multi-colored coats of the multi-national kids. The wheels of a new day are turning.

"Volunteering where?" Wang Xin sighs.

Yvonne's voice echoes as she opens the door.

"A mental institution."

Elsewhere in Beijing, a wheel is broken. Out in the wilds, where the slick roads become dirt tracks, there's a barrack like building surrounded by a fence. Those who live here draw water from a well. The well wheel is broken, so for up to four days they'll have no water. This is Beijing Chaoyang Mental Health Center.

Yang Yun, the psychiatric nurse who runs the center, is an angel. Perhaps you're too anxious to leave the house or you hear voices in your stomach. Or you cut the head off your newborn to release the evil inside. You probably have nowhere else to go. So you end up here.

Around 180 people live behind the fences, all checked in for ¥800 a month. A state run facility costs three times that. Yang Yun is an angel but China has only 14,000 qualified psychiatrists and that's not enough. So you take your pills, talk, sit, doze, sleep...

"What can I do?" Yvonne asks Yang Yun. She sees the toilets a communal pit. She sees aging treadmills and dull medicated faces.

"Help," says Yang Yun.

John Zane, who introduced Yvonne to Yang Yun, has been teaching English. Lately he's moved onto gardening therapy. Another friend, Natascha Prigge, convinces Hines Real Estate to donate furniture. Over time, real people emerge from behind the medication. A miracle happens when Volkswagen funds a trip "out".

Time passes. Cars pass. At a roadside rest stop two white women keep an eye on a gentle crowd of wide-eyed Chinese.

"The problem is it's easy for them to get lazy," Yvonne tells Natascha.

"Trips like this help some, but most are too nervous to leave the center. They don't have enough stimulation," Natascha agrees.



"But what more can we do?"

The wheel is back in motion. It isn't enough. Yvonne directs the stragglers back to the bus. What more can we do?

Months go by. Dozens of wheels slow and stop. The light is red. Traffic, Yvonne thinks. Typical. She looks beyond her windshield to the familiar sight of an old hutong being demolished. The front facade of a building rolls forward and reveals not a house. Something else. She parks the car. She shouts to the demolition crew.

"Who owns this place?"

A chubby middle-aged man shuffles over and introduces himself.

"Is that an oven?"

She points at the old metal cooker being pulled from the far wall. He nods.

"I need it," she says. "And do you need a new job?"

Yvonne is driving to the center. The baker squeezes his shoulders into the upholstery. Working for westerners! His eyes gleam with questions.

"Just wait till you see the place," Yvonne tells him. "It's special work."

Yvonne explains that they want to teach him to bake western style. Then he can teach the patients. Together they will sell the items to the German School and earn money for the facility. The baker declines the offer and the price he wants for his oven is too high.

But the idea lingers. They buy a new oven with funds Natascha rustles up. The cook at the center is willing and Yvonne and Natascha teach him to bake. He teaches three patients, then six. The patients are busy, but will the products sell?

Who will buy food made in a hospital, Natascha wonders.

Move forward six months. All eyes are on Leo, Natascha's five year old boy, sitting on the table in the center's kitchen. He's holding a plastic tiger, which is captivating, and a cinnamon roll, which is less so. The aroma of fresh bread and cinnamon ripples through the assembly like a soft stage curtain on opening night. Leo takes a bite of a cinnamon roll. Then takes a second nibble. Shoulders soften. Five Chinese on medication for mental illness have made their first batch of western cakes. They've passed the test.

It isn't long before Yvonne and Natascha have a platoon of volunteers selling the bagels, pretzels, cinnamon rolls and more. The bakers enjoy doing something other than playing cards or smoking. And all the patients enjoy dreaming up ways to spend their new source of income, while wondering who is actually crazy. After all, you'd be mad to pay ¥3 for a dry cake that's much too sweet anyway.

That spring, the patients bought themselves three air conditioning units and two washing machines, and had money to run them all

summer. In the past, some had chosen to sleep on the cold floor tiles to keep cool. Toilets can wait. But it's just the beginning. Yvonne's not needed anymore - the bakers keep the wheels turning themselves. She wonders now if they can imagine having nothing to do everyday.

"I have a good life in China, and plenty to get on with," she says. "Crazybake is what I've given back."

I Gareth George

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