

By Gareth George

“We’d have started earlier, if we could have come up with a name. Psycho bake, mental bake...they just didn’t sound right. Then we thought ‘crazy bake’. The patients were very unsure at first, but I think we’re reclaiming the word. And anyway, ‘crazy’ has a lot of positive connotations in the West.” Yvonne Gerig is in a hurry. In the taxi, she streams words, as though powering the combustion engine through sheer verbal energy.

She has the aura of one who is ‘hands on’ in all she does. Yvonne, (along with friends Natascha Prigge and John Zane,) has a second job. It doesn’t pay the bills, but as she says “I have a good life in China. Crazy bake is what I’m giving back.”

For three years, the friends have been volunteering at Beijing Chaoyang District Mental Health Service Center, a home for the mentally ill. Yvonne has studied psychology, Natascha’s a whiz at rustling up donations and John does ‘garden therapy.’ Yvonne explains: “The fact is that at the moment the mentally ill in China, at least in my experience, don’t have enough stimulation and are left too reliant on medication.”

This remark isn’t meant to

ingl.” The idea was to combine something the patients could get involved in with a small business they could make a little profit from, just to buy things for the hospital. Unfortunately, it was never going to be that simple. “The baker took one look at who he would be working with and refused flat out. Then he tried to sell us his oven for more than we eventually bought a new one!”

And yet the idea flourished. While plans were drawn up, Natascha managed to raise 1,200 euros, almost entirely from private donations. Yvonne trained the hospital cook in baking ‘Western style’, and they started to bake with the patients. There were three at first, then they trained two more. The patient/bakers now work in shifts, two or three days a week, for a few hours at a time. Since November crazy bake has been delivering traditional home made pretzels, bagels, hedgehog treats and more to the children at the German school, a university and some compounds. The project has succeeded because of the many volunteers who have helped with the distribution.

There are people from all walks of life in the Center. A privately run facility, sending a loved one here for treatment



his telephone numbers, and has had no contact with them since. He worked for some years for a private company as a translator and interpreter. Then he became “Very anxious with his environment,” as he puts it. Shortly afterwards, he was hospitalized. He’s now 36. Ted’s story is more complicated. Yvonne tries to tell it: “It’s not something he can really talk about.”

Bill returns crestfallen. The translator has beaten him at pool “Don’t be too over-confident.” He tells her “I am on medication.” In the bakery, the test run of cinnamon rolls is ready, and the bakers are ready to get down to the serious business of what to charge. The discussion is heated. Yvonne talks about the process. “They are always amazed at how much we can get – People pay three yuan for that? Who’s crazy?? – so they aim high. But remember, the more they get, the more they can afford for the ward.”

It was a dream come true for the patients to get an air conditioning unit for the dining room. The profits from crazy bake sales all go to the patients and they decide between them how to spend it. “So far we have the air conditioning and two washing machines.” Says Yvonne. “They have already earmarked future profits for two more air conditioners – it gets so hot in summer, many of them sleep on the tiles rather than their beds.”

All eyes are on Leo. He is the crazy bake team’s very own guinea pig, and his reaction to the cinnamon rolls is noted in reverend silence. He savours a mouthful, looking as thoughtful as a three year old can, although he’s not so overwhelmed that he forgets his plastic tiger. But the target market seems to approve. He takes an-

# 1 Oven, 5 Bakers

How three foreigners are helping Beijing’s forgotten souls to help themselves

# and 180 Nuts

damn the system. The problem is that right now, China has roughly the same number of psychiatrists as France – and for a country China’s size, that’s just not enough. In some Western hospitals, they introduce pets for the patients to care for. Here these small animals become rivals – for food and affection. Yvonne shrugs. “It takes a very special person to become a psychiatric nurse. The nurse who runs our facility, Yang Yun, gets paid and she was made for the job. But her husband died recently, so she’s virtually running it alone. And she doesn’t drive, so if you forget the salary, she’s basically one of the patients.”

Yvonne and her fellow volunteers have tried their best to provide stimulation for the patients, and some respite for the staff. Initially it was an English class then gardening. “The whole idea was to get them busy and to make them feel useful. It’s easy for them to get lazy. They may play pool or badminton for a while, but when that’s all you have every day...” Yvonne says. The patients also enjoyed simple things most take for granted: the freedom they were afforded, being able to choose dishes in a restaurant when they stopped for lunch. “They can’t get enough meat.” Sighs Natascha, smiling.

### The Big Idea

One day, Yvonne passed a baker’s near her apartment. His shop was due to be demolished, and on the spur of the moment she offered him a job. “I had this idea that we could bake some cakes, then sell them to the children at the German Kindergarten [Yvonne teaches and runs the German kindergarten when not volunteer-



Yvonne, Natascha and Leo  
Photos by Bao Wei

costs 800 yuan a month, compared to the government facilities, which cost 3,000. “People are rarely picked up off the street.” Yvonne says “Their family’s send them because they can’t care for them at home, or they can’t ensure they take their medication.” With the mentally ill, maintaining regular drug therapy is very important. “The only problem is, you occasionally have some people who can’t pay the fees, so they have to go back home. One woman who was here had beheaded her baby during a psychotic episode. Her family couldn’t afford the fee, so she went back to live with them. God knows where she is now.” The patients mostly suffer from depression or schizophrenia, although there are some patients with dementia “They don’t belong here, obviously, but they have no-one and there’s nowhere else for them to go.”

### Leo and the Bakers

Natascha’s three years old, Leo, strolls through the gate, ac-

knowledging the attentions of the patients who are delighted to see him. Three of them are particularly pleased – ruffling his hair and bending down to pull faces. Do they work here? One - Bill - shakes his head “No! We’re madmen!” Ted, his friend, rolls his eyes “Don’t frighten them, Bill. They’re visitors.”

Ted and Bill are two of the bakers. The third on shift today is Annie. She has been at the hospital about five years. She particularly enjoys baking pretzels and bagels, and she seems to enjoy the Crazybake produce more than her colleagues (“Too dry.” “Just so-so.”) Today she’s looking forward to seeing how cinnamon rolls are made. They’re a new product and all the bakers are keen to see the process. The hope is that the sweet pastries will prove popular with their young clientele. She explains all this lucidly and in good English: the subject she chose for her Bachelor degree. In fact, all of the bak-



Pretzels



Yvonne and a friend

ers are University educated. Bill studied Industrial Foreign Trade while Ted studied Industrial Design at the prestigious Tong Ji University in Shanghai. Ted and Bill are old friends. They have both been here four years and spend much of the afternoon joking and arguing. Bill likes baking, “It means being useful. Otherwise I’d just be talking, playing cards, playing table ten-

nis...” He rapidly lists several other things he might otherwise be doing before offering everyone yet another can of Coke. Someone answers: “Not unless you have dental facilities here now, Bill.” he sighs in mock condescension “Of course not. This is a mental hospital,” before disappearing for a game of pool.

Bill misses his friends. When he came to the hospital, he lost

other bite. Yvonne and Natascha have been bringing their children here since they started volunteering. “The patients don’t get a lot of time with kids” Yvonne says, “Annie actually has a boyfriend. They wanted to get married, but of course that’s not allowed, so they will never have children of their own.” Annie and her boyfriend exchange gifts when they see each other. Bananas, cakes. Whatever they have. Annie tells people he only stays because of her “Of course, in reality he is being treated here as well.”

### The Future

There was another baker once, named Boris. He had been an AIDS researcher in Norway when voices in his stomach told him to return to China. He ended up here. But eventually, he got himself together and left “He’s been gone a year now.” Says Yvonne “I hope he’s doing OK.” Out of earshot of the patients, the conversation turns darker for the first time “Ted, Bill and others, they still have a belief that they will return to their old lives when they get out. The reality is they will probably never leave. They’ve been here too long. And even if they do, they won’t be able to go back to their old jobs. That’s why what we’re doing is so important. It gives them something to get involved in. To get excited about. To improve their lives. And everyone needs that.” Yvonne hopes ultimately to open a dedicated bakery in the city, with the bakers taking day trips out to work.

Already, Yvonne and co are surplus to requirements on baking days. “They can do it all themselves now, as soon as we’ve shown them the recipes.” Yvonne says. She holds up the finished product, packaged and exuding a warm cinnamon scent. A brown paper bag. Underneath the logo it reads “Made with love by Crazy hands.” There is a simplicity, a purity to this endeavour. A group of people working together to improve their lives and the lives of those around them. And what’s so crazy about that?

Some of the names have been changed at the individuals’ request.

If you’d be interested in having crazybake products delivered, call Natascha on 13520893359.