

Chinese orphans find a friend in Central Oregon A Bend special education teacher is leading an effort to help needy children

By Scott Hammers / *The Bulletin*

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Central Oregon welcomed the Year of the Dragon on Saturday night, celebrating the Chinese New Year at the Boys & Girls Club in Bend at a fundraiser to benefit orphaned Chinese children.

A benefit for Education for Chinese Orphans, or EChO, Saturday's party featured a buffet from China Doll restaurant and auctions for Chinese art and other items, all to raise money for special needs children living in an orphanage in Kaifeng, a city of nearly 5 million located between Beijing and Shanghai in northeastern China.

EChO founder Robert Tadjiki first learned of the plight of Chinese orphans when he and his wife Stephanie traveled to China to adopt their daughter in 2004. On that trip, he met a man who had trained orphanage residents to paint traditional Chinese scrolls, and on his return, he set up a business to help the orphans sell their scrolls in the United States.

A few years later, the Tadjikis were headed back to China, looking to set up a school for orphaned children.

Although Tadjiki had already been a special education teacher for nearly a decade, special-needs orphans were scarcely on his radar until the trip began. Wanting to know how to best focus his efforts, he inquired as to where the greatest need was in a meeting with government officials. Their answer was special-needs students, those with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and other conditions he deals with daily as a teacher in the Life Skills program at Bend High School.

"That just threw me into a tailspin, because I know how hard it is," Tadjiki said. "I know exactly how hard it is."

Years later, EChO is educating 40 special-needs orphans. Students in the program receive physical therapy and



Ryan Brennecke / The Bulletin

Guests mingle during the annual Oregon Chinese New Year Benefit for Education for Chinese Orphans, which was held Saturday at the Boys & Girls Club in Bend. EChO raises money for special needs orphans in Kaifeng, China.



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instruction in basic life skills like dressing and feeding themselves, and Tadjiki said he's hopeful most of them will grow into adults capable of holding a job and living a relatively normal life.

Board member Jenny Murphy recalled meeting a boy at the school in Kaifeng who had extremely limited mobility because of his cerebral palsy. Now 7, the boy has learned to roll himself over after a year of physical therapy, she said, and delights in showing off his new skills for visitors.

"It's just amazing the things we take for granted," Murphy said.

Chris Brasier, 58, of Bend, decided to sponsor a 10-year-old boy from the orphanage Saturday night.

A retired nurse, Brasier said she's sponsored two children through different organizations for nearly 15 years, helping to provide educations to a boy from Kenya and a girl from India. The Indian girl recently graduated from school, and she said she wanted to add another child to the mix.

Knowing there is a specific child benefitting from her donations is important, Brasier said.

"You feel like a personal contact. It's not just giving money to whatever," she said.

It costs \$25 a month to sponsor a student. The group hopes to open a second school.

Brasier recalled visiting China in 1979 and finding it both extremely fascinating and extremely foreign, with bicycles everywhere and crowds of Mao-suited Chinese gathering to stare every time she and the Westerners she was traveling with went outside.

Tadjiki said that while much has changed in China since Brasier's visit, it remains a difficult place for those with mental or physical disabilities, sometimes as an unintended consequence of official government policy.

Because of China's one-child policy and limited programs for the elderly, Chinese parents depend on their child's financial success to support them in their old age. Because children born with disabilities are largely unable to do so, they are often given away to orphanages.

Once in an orphanage, disabled children receive limited attention — in part, Tadjiki said, because it is assumed programs to keep disabled adults fed and housed will provide for the children once they grow up.

Cyndee Overland, a former EChO board member and child sponsor, said she was struck by what she saw when she went to China to adopt her two daughters. Children with disabilities were largely ignored, left, "like lumps of clay," she said, in drab rooms with no stimulation and limited attention.

Overland said the organization has also provided an opportunity for her daughters to experience Chinese culture, something that is not easy to do in Central Oregon.

Overland said she knows only a small amount about Dongdong, the Chinese boy she's sponsored for the last two years and whose portrait she wore on a string around her neck Saturday. While she hopes to see the school in Kaifeng on her next trip to China and possibly meet Dongdong, Overland said she'd be content just to be helping those who need it.

"Because I'm forever grateful to that country for my children, I'm happy to help wherever the need is greatest," she said.

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