



PHOTO: COURTESY OF JULIAN LEE

Mr Julian Lee (centre of last row, in green) with Peruvian youth and local and Singaporean volunteers, outside an education centre in a shanty town.

Educating youth in Peru

Doing good can be hard going. For Mr Julian Lee, 40, red tape hindered the setting up of a non-profit organisation in Peru, he recalls.

Mr Lee, president of Generation Acts Club International, which educates and develops youth through classes and activities, says it sometimes took three to four attempts just to drop off a form with the Peruvian authorities.

His organisation had to go through many steps of getting signatures recognised, having documents translated and even making sure the translator was an official one before the authorities would accept their forms and documents.

He says: "It would have been easier if we had a local lawyer but we could not afford one."

"Once we help teach them how to run it, we give it to them and come back."

MR JULIAN LEE on the concept of Generation Acts Club International

language) qualifications, which allow him to teach English overseas.

The idea for setting up Generation Acts Club International overseas was a result of a trip to Peru to visit church friends in 2002.

Mr Lee had already started a Generation Acts Club in Singapore and his Peru visit inspired him to make a difference there and help youth and children from low-income families. He is an engineer, but has TEFL

(teaching English as a foreign language) qualifications, which allow him to teach English overseas.

"We felt we have more to give overseas because the poor there are very much poorer than those here."

In 2003, he quit his job giving management and leadership training to executives and, with his wife, Ms Cha Yoke Kwang, 38, and three other friends, left for Peru to found the first overseas spin-off of his youth club. Two other groups of friends also set out for Ecuador and Chile to start branches of Generation Acts Club International there.

The club organises activities and classes for children and youth aged six to 16 who participate in bonding or confidence-building activities and also take mathematics and English lessons.

"We're not building infrastructure or trying to replace the country's education system, we're just adding value and teaching values," Mr Lee says, adding that the club is purely secular.

The programmes are free, but the children pay a fee for materials such as books, and the amount paid is tiered according to family income.

All the money collected is ploughed back into the programmes. The volunteers also chip in with money from their day jobs as teachers and also get donations – in terms of books, toys and materials – from Singaporeans.

For example, in Peru, Mr Lee says he and his fellow volunteers spent US\$20,000 of their own savings to start the programme. He and the other volunteers do not take a salary and mostly support themselves by teaching English to private students or corporate clients.

He says: "Each group has to find a way to sustain its programmes in each country."

Generation Acts Club has handed over the reins of the club to locals in Ecuador and is hoping to do so soon in Peru. The branch in Chile has ceased.

"Once we help teach them how to run it, we give it to them and come back," says Mr Lee, who spent six years in Peru and returned to Singapore about two years ago.

Volunteers from the club have gone into other countries such as Cambodia and Indonesia and others are exploring the possibility of starting the club in Nepal and Myanmar next year.

Says Mr Lee: "We don't start off with great plans, it's just something natural to us; if we see a need, we meet it. We travel and if someone wants to set something up, he can use our programmes but he has to make it self-sustaining."

On whether he is ready to embark on his next overseas project, he says: "I'll go if there is a need."

C M Y K