

FIRST STEPS

news

WINTER 2010

Craig's Diary

By Craig Ketchum

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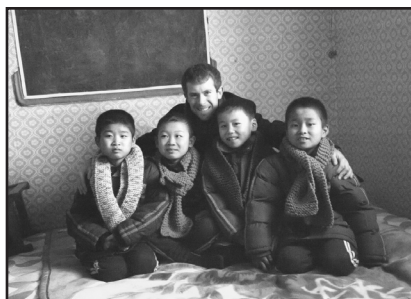
Looking back on my week-long visit, I could tell that children in the DPRK face a host of problems. Outside the capital, stunted growth was the norm for the children we saw. It became clear that First Steps' sustainable investment in the children of the DPRK is brightening the future wherever its mission gets involved. The children don't just benefit from soymilk and Sprinkles, they also encounter love from First Steps' representatives with every effort and every visit. In a nation filled with mistrust of the outside world, the children are seeing that love and compassion are possible.

First Steps' impact in the DPRK is unprecedented. For starters, the trust extended by government officials is astounding because they are confident of First Steps' ability to make good on its intentions. This is due principally to the development and steady growth of the soymilk and Sprinkles programs.

As First Steps grows, I am confident that it will not only continue to expand its mandate to nourish children physically, but also to touch the hearts of the people with the love of Jesus.

Tues., Nov. 23 – This was my second visit to DPRK. After arrival and getting settled, I collapse on my bed at the Koryo Hotel with many forceful emotions churning inside me.

Anger and sorrow have been drawn out by empathy for the people of the DPRK. I am eager to step for the first time outside of the polished capital and into the folksier countryside towns.



Craig with boys modeling their new scarves at Wonsan orphanage.

one marked by plenty, the other by deprivation.

I am sad at the separation that's occurred for 60 years and I am exasperated by the eternity it seems to be taking the governments of the South and North and their respective allies to see eye-to-eye.



Happy children at Wonsan kindergarten orphanage.

Allow God to carry my thoughts and prayers to the things needed for peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula: forgiveness, patience, faith, hope, and love. Just before my eyes close, God reminds me that as we come to know his plans, we will walk in confident expectation. He reminds me not to get too caught up in emotions that distract me from His presence.

Wed., Nov. 24 – Visited Nampo soymilk sites, orphanages and kindergartens in this city of 970,000 that somehow runs without a steady supply of electricity.

The children seem genuinely loved by their teachers and caregivers. Small acts, like a little pat on the bottom or blowing on hot cups of soymilk to cool them enough for the little ones to drink, demonstrate authentic care and investment in the children's well-being.

Spending time filming the children at mealtime, I flipped the viewfinder around so the children could see their own faces. Soon I had a large crowd

crawling all over me. One little girl curiously stroked my cheek, rough with a 5 o'clock shadow. As we looked into each others' faces it was easy to see a language barrier stood in the way of further communication, but love and care speak universally. A little boy perched himself on my knee as I sat among the little ones filling their tummies with freshly-made soymilk.



Sam with triplets at Wonsan baby home.

Thurs., Nov. 25 – Tonight we were taken to see the DPRK State Symphony Orchestra, a 110-member ensemble brandishing all kinds of classical and traditional Korean instruments. Front and centre sat a bright red piano – the colour of the regime.

The first piece, translated "Let My Country Prosper," was nothing less than astounding, filled with intricate fingerwork on the piano and masterfully matched by a flowing river of strings. The violinists – over 60 of them – played as one.

It was powerful.

After several more enjoyable pieces, including the Prelude from Bizet's Carmen, the concert ended with a fortuitous piece entitled "Our General", written in honour of Kim Jung-Il. The musicians also sang some more enthusiastically than others – in military fashion, true to national form. The concert was

received with enthusiastic applause by foreigners and nationals alike and we all left deeply impressed.

Sat., Nov. 27 – A delayed start ended up working out for the best on our long drive to Wonsan. Snow came, as forecasted, meaning blizzard conditions at the rugged mountain passes. With the exception of a few trucks and buses, nearly every vehicle we passed on the way was stopped by the side of the road! Curiously enough, our bus kept rumbling on through the ice, snow, and dark tunnels (one of which was 4 kilometres long!) without

stopping or hitting anything – despite the presence of hundreds of shovel-equipped road workers who insisted on staying put in the middle of the road until the last second! God was with us, having grace on us and knowing fully of our limited schedule in which to make the maximum impact on each location we visited.

Sun., Nov. 28 – As we drive the coastal highway connecting Wonsan to neighbouring areas, there were lots of new things to notice. Bungalows and rail bridges that could have passed for Soviet-era sit amid rugged savannah-like terrain. The road is lined with pines and other trees that must look beautiful in the spring, but they are barren now. Turquoise waters and sandy beaches lie just fifty or a hundred yards from the side of the road. The road is paved with concrete slabs, making our bus feel more like a train clicking along. Workers with shovels and ox-carts work in huge gangs to repair the roads with sand, with as many as 50 labourers on the road surface with no advance warning signs. Luckily for us, our driver got us through the blizzard and tunnels incident-free, as he retained caution for these unpredictable highway bends.

After the mountain passes between Pyongyang and Wonsan, there are vast farming flatlands that have been worked for years and years.

Clusters of identical homesteads form communities dedicated to farming for the nation. Many of these houses are terraced up the mountain to maximize flatland space. However this year, Wonsan has

been hit by a twin typhoon and tsunami, destroying crops and livestock alike. So Wonsan is where we tried to dedicate a bulk of this trip's resources, adding VitaCows and bringing medicines to make the winter less bitter. We discovered that many orphanages and boarding schools are without means of heating during the winter, and many have leaky roofs. We hope that donors can partner with First Steps to address these urgent but fixable needs.



Snack time at Dongchon kindergarten.



Bongchon food factory in Wonsan .