

Volunteers bring much needed Christmas cheer to Hong Kong's most vulnerable

- With parties, food bags and a festive screening of the latest Star Wars epic, the city's charities and helpers hope no one is left out this year

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Actor Donnie Yen with some of the 300 underprivileged children treated to a special screening of the new Star Wars film. Photo: Jonathan Wong

Volunteers have pulled out all the stops to bring some Christmas cheer to the most vulnerable Hongkongers, marking the end of a year in which it was revealed the city's wealth gap had grown.

Charities and non-governmental organisations rallied together to support and bring holiday cheer to disadvantaged children, elderly people and the homeless over the festive season.

They held parties, food distribution days and a free film screening among other events across the city in the final days leading up to Christmas.

The flurry of activity closes a year in which new statistics revealed some of Hong Kong's richest residents now earned about 29 times more than the poorest.

The number of low-income households also increased by 1.7 per cent from 454,100 in 2014 to 461,900 last year, according to Oxfam Hong Kong's Poverty Report 2011-2015.

This was despite outgoing Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying putting "alleviating poverty" as one of the key agendas on his 2012 election manifesto.

Although the number of children classed as living in poverty in Hong Kong has shown signs of falling, a recent study found that one in six local children still could not afford to eat out with friends, according to joint research by several universities.

The same study found 12.9 per cent of children could not afford extra curricular activities, while 13.9 per cent did not have a suitable place to study, which researchers classed as "necessities".

The results have once again sparked concerns that a significant proportion of the city's young people remain disadvantaged from birth and are subsequently slipping through the net.

FOR KIDS

On December 17, children's charity Chicken Soup Foundation treated 300 underprivileged children to a premiere of the latest Star Wars instalment. Star Wars actor Donnie Yen Ji-dan joined the special screening of *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* at MOKO UA in Mong Kok.

In the film, the 53-year-old actor from Guangzhou plays Chirrut Imwe, a highly intelligent warrior-monk who is blind. He said he hoped he could inspire young Hongkongers by becoming the first Chinese actor to play a leading role in a Star Wars film.



Star Wars actor Donnie Yen and supporting cast at the premiereMong Kok. Photo: Jonathan Wong

The screening marked a collaboration between Chicken Soup Foundation and FilmAsia, which uses films to educate refugees and grass roots communities in Asia.

N.C. Kwong, FilmAid Asia’s development director, said it was a good opportunity to share a visually impressive film with children who did not necessarily have English or Cantonese as a first language.

She said it was also helpful for the children to hear about opportunities in film from a major Chinese actor.



Donnie Yen poses with fans. Photos: Jonathan Wong

“We were so happy that Donnie could join,” she said. “He told them how he worked so hard to get to this position. And the images of the film really transcend language and background. Some of these kids have only just arrived in Hong Kong from mainland China. They do not necessarily need a college education to get into film – areas such as lighting are more about experience than the technical side.”

Meanwhile at the Hong Kong Youth Federation Groups building in Quarry Bay, storytelling charity Hans Andersen Club made further efforts to support Hong Kong’s young people over the Christmas period.

The charity held three Alice in Wonderland workshops to connect young and often underprivileged children with the older generation. The workshops were priced at HK\$80 for children aged three to seven, but special arrangements could be made for children from low-income backgrounds.

This year Hans Andersen is one of the 23 beneficiaries of Operation Santa Claus, the joint charity campaign between the *South China Morning Post* and RTHK which has raised more than HK\$250 million for local charities since 1988.

Esther Chan, Hans Andersen’s public relations manager, said the project was giving children support with literacy.

“It will nurture children’s creative and communicative skills,” she said. “We find Alice in Wonderland is particularly interesting because the characters really stand out. We want to have help from elderly people because in general in Hong Kong, parents have to work long hours.”

FOR ELDERLY AND HOMELESS

Hong Kong's poor, elderly and homeless populations also received support throughout December from Sunshine Action, which holds volunteering events to help some of the city's most vulnerable.

The charity aims to distribute 3,400 food bags to 25 support centres during this month and next, helping about 6,000 people over Christmas and the Lunar New Year.

Charity founder Sunny Mak said it had been difficult to collect enough donations this year and that the number of volunteers had also dwindled. He said next year he planned to promote more one-off volunteering days to enable the charity to offer more to its beneficiaries.

"During the party season, the people we help might want to go out for something a bit extra, but they can't," he said. "We want to help them to celebrate a little bit. Particularly for the elderly, having a visit from a volunteer is a blessing."

FOR PEOPLE IN CRISIS

Finally at KUC Space in Jordan, Bethune House, a charity that provides emergency food and accommodation for domestic helpers in times of crisis, will tonight hold its annual Christmas Eve gathering.

About 80 people are expected to join for a feast of Indonesian and Filipino food, as well as games and Christmas carols.

Presents have been donated for the workers by the American Women's Association.

Edwina Antonio, the charity's executive director, said it was particularly important to support the workers around Christmas time, as they were unable to visit their families at home.

"Most of them have lost their job and are waiting for their cases to be heard," she said. "Many of them look forward to this event. This time of the year, they feel homesick and lonely as they are away from their families. That is why we do this every year."

Tis the season ...

At the heart of Christmas is the spirit of giving. And while most of us are buying gifts for our close friends and families, NGOs across the city and beyond are making sure all members of the community, including the vulnerable and the underprivileged, share in the holiday spirit.

For those who want to extend their Christmas cheer this festive season – be it through physical gifts, volunteering your time or a simple donation – here's a list of organisations that you can help. Even the smallest gesture of kindness can go a long way.

Oxfam Unwrapped

The charity has an online shop where you can purchase a school desk, books, even a pair of goats, chickens or safe water for rural communities around the world. You can also give a young girl an entire education, or give rural households energy-saving stoves or solar water heaters.

www.oxfam.org.hk

Plan International Hong Kong

The organisation asks donors to purchase any number of their Gifts of Hope, which help millions of underprivileged children across the world. The gift options include vital necessities such as school supplies, hygiene kits, clean water and food.

www.plan.org.hk/en

Box of Hope

The annual charity project asks donors to pack their own box of useful and educational gifts, which is then delivered to underprivileged children in Hong Kong and other parts of Asia. The project has collected more than 27,000 boxes this year in the lead-up to Christmas.

www.boxofhope.org

Animals Asia

Thousands of bears are imprisoned in farms across mainland China and Vietnam, where they endure brutal confinement and have their bile forcibly extracted. To bring joy to the rescued bears, Animals Asia encourages individuals to buy them gifts such as a swing, or even a life-saving surgery in the future.

www.animalsasia.org

Hong Kong Dog Rescue

With around 7,000 dogs and puppies put down every year, the charity is raising money to support its mission to rescue, rehabilitate and find homes for the city's homeless dogs. By donating this Christmas, Hong Kong Dog Rescue will send your loved ones a personalised online greeting card.

www.hongkongdogrescue.com

HandsOn Hong Kong

The charity needs volunteers to help with a Christmas buffet lunch on December 27 for children and teenagers with disabilities. It is also recruiting volunteers to take the students to East Tsim Sha Tsui for a day of exploring during the holiday season.

www.handsonhongkong.org

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