

Charity conjures up HK\$150,000 for appeal



Rita Lo (centre) and Hong Kong Unison's Amy Ho Kit-fan with Po Kok Primary School pupils. Photo: K. Y. Cheng

Celine Sun

For the 10th consecutive year the World Children's Fund, an international charity group, has been a major donor to Operation Santa Claus.

This year it donated HK\$150,000 to support Hong Kong Unison, one of the charity appeal's 13 beneficiaries, to run a community engagement and racial harmony project for ethnic minority children.

Set up in 1993, the US-based charity group works through a global network to help rescue needy children who are abandoned, distressed, endangered, exploited and homeless.

In Hong Kong, the World Children's Fund has been connected to the disadvantaged community through Operation Santa Claus over the past decade.

"We've been raising funds from the city to help children around the world," said Rita Lo Man-ping, su-



South China Morning Post

pervisor of donor services with the fund's Hong Kong office. "Yet we are also great believers in giving back to the community that is always generous to us."

The group has provided life-saving food, medicine and shelter for deprived and suffering children in Africa, India, Thailand and mainland China.

As well as its financial aid to Hong

Kong Unison, the children's fund also sponsored a magic show for more than 70 ethnic minority children at Po Kok Primary School this month.

Giggles and cheers filled the hall as magician Jaron Deerwester performed his tricks in front of the children, mostly born in Nepal, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Egypt.

Hayden Alquitran, six, was the first student invited on stage. Holding a magic wand in one hand, he was amazed to see it turn different colours at every touch of the magician.

"I have no idea how it happened. It's magic," said Hayden, who is from the Philippines.

An estimated 270 mainstream primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong have ethnic minority students. Over the next two years, Hong Kong Unison plans to provide educational help and mentoring to these children, organise school talks, theatre programmes and training for teachers on racial issues.

Co-organised by the *South China Morning Post* and Radio Television Hong Kong, Operation Santa Claus – now in its 21st year – will benefit 13 charitable groups. Part of the funds raised will go to the *Post's* Homes for Hope project to help victims of the devastating May 12 earthquake in Sichuan (四川) rebuild.

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Mainland visitors help boost trade in city Sales up, despite the economic downturn

Peter So, Ng Yuk-hang and Agnes Lam

Tills are ringing this festive season despite the economic downturn, thanks in part to the spending power of mainland shoppers.

Mall management companies are reporting increases in both sales and the number of shoppers – some to record levels.

Irene So Kit-lin, general manager of retail marketing and promotions at Sino Group, said Olympian City drew 670,000 people on Christmas Eve and yesterday – up 11 per cent on last year.

She said business turnover was about HK\$15.2 million, up by 6 per cent from last year's.

Maureen Fung Sau-yim, general manager for leasing at Sun Hung Kai Real Estate Agency, said about 490,000 people thronged the APM mall in Kwun Tong over the past two days, an increase of 10 per cent from last year. She estimated turnover would reach HK\$55 million during the five-day holiday between December 24 and 28, which would represent an increase of 10 per cent.

Karen Tam Kar-ying, Harbour City's promotions and advertising



Visitors to the Hong Kong Food Festival yesterday. Photo: Ricky Chung

senior manager, said an attendance record of 300,000 was reported on Christmas Eve, a 15 per cent increase over last year.

"Many mainland visitors go shopping at our mall and they account for about 10 to 20 per cent of our shoppers. These mainland shoppers don't just come and walk around – they are really spending money," she said.

A spokeswoman for the Chinese Manufacturers' Association also said business was holding up well, with many mainlanders – most of them independent travellers, not with tour groups – visiting the annual Hong Kong Brands and Products Expo.

About 124,000 people visited the event yesterday at Victoria Park. Fashion shops were also doing a

brisk trade. Boutique Deko'z, in Central, said its business volume this month was up about 30 per cent over the same period last year.

Manager Iris Chan said more mainland visitors were visiting the shop, and she expected business to hold up until the Lunar New Year next month.

Some businesses used discounts to entice customers.

Stalls at the Hong Kong Food Festival, which opened yesterday at the Convention and Exhibition Centre, attracted long queues, especially after operators introduced massive markdowns.

A company that specialises in seafood imported from Hokkaido, Japan, cut its prices by 15 to 20 per cent, selling one Japanese spider crab for HK\$1.

Meanwhile, Travel Industry Council executive director Joseph Tung Yiu-chung said business was better than expected.

Many holidaymakers had signed up for short package tours this year to places such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and the mainland. By 10pm yesterday, more than 452,000 people had left Hong Kong.

Airport strike looms over bonuses

Ng Kang-chung

The Labour Department and Airport Authority yesterday called for calm ahead of a possible strike by ground workers angry over a decision that would provide a 2 per cent pay rise next year but cut bonuses.

The workers said the company plan was unacceptable because it would reduce their annual pay by about 7 per cent. They threatened to strike if the company refused to reverse its decision.

At the centre of the saga is a recent decision by Hong Kong Airport Services to halve the annual bonus for more than 3,000 workers. The firm blamed the global economic downturn for the decision.

The workers, most of whom make about HK\$6,000 to HK\$8,000 a month, used to receive annual bonuses equivalent to two months' salary, their union said.

"There was no consultation," said Ip Wai-ming, a lawmaker and deputy general secretary of the Staff and

Workers Union of Hong Kong Civil Airlines. "The company said it was because of the recession, but the workload... has not been reduced."

He said that during the Sars crisis in 2003 the company still paid bonuses equivalent to six weeks' salary.

Mr Ip said he hoped to meet the management and resolve the issue in the next day or two.

"There are some workers saying we should strike if the company refuses to listen to us... The last thing we want is to see airport services par-

alysed during the peak holiday period, but it all depends on the company's response."

A spokesman for the Labour Department said it was monitoring the situation and had been helping to arrange meetings between the two sides. "We hope both sides can handle the issue rationally," he said.

An Airport Authority spokeswoman said it hoped both sides could resolve their differences.

An Airport Services spokesman could not be reached.

Peaceful Christmas after transplant

Ng Yuk-hang

A mother with hepatitis B who received a liver transplant three weeks ago spent a peaceful Christmas at home yesterday, her husband said.

Flora Kwok Wing-mui, 34, who suffered from acute liver failure and was sent to hospital on November 28, underwent a transplant operation on December 4. The anonymous donor was a woman who had come forward following a public appeal by Ms Kwok's family.

"She is back at home and is still very feeble," said Ms Kwok's 43-year-

old husband, Kelvin Tong Ka-chun. "We will not do anything special for Christmas except let her rest."

Mr Tong said the identity of the donor remained unknown so he was unable to send Christmas greetings.

"I am sure the donor needs a lot of rest, just as my wife does," Mr Tong said. He said he hoped to meet the donor at the hospital so he could thank her in person.

The Kwok family did not have a traditional Christmas dinner yesterday, as doctors had advised Ms Kwok to eat only plain vegetables and meat. Mr Tong said his only Christmas

wish was that every member of his family would be healthy and strong, and that his main task was to take care of his wife.

Ms Kwok, a hepatitis B carrier from the age of 12, was admitted to Kwong Wah Hospital late last month and then moved to Queen Mary Hospital in critical condition.

Her family began searching for a donor through a massive campaign of e-mails, postings to online forums and calls to radio shows.

Their call was answered on the evening of December 4, when a suitable donor agreed to the transplant.

Macau hotel evacuated over fire

Ng Kang-chung

About 400 guests and gamblers poured out of a hotel in the centre of Macau early yesterday when it was evacuated because of a fire in a kitchen.

The holidaymakers, some of them dressed in pyjamas, covered their faces with towels because of the smoke.

Some managed to take their luggage with them as they left the four-star Hotel Presidente.

Some guests later complained

that hotel staff had not awakened them so they could flee.

The fire was reported at about 3am when a ventilation duct in a second-floor kitchen caught fire.

Guests smelled smoke and sprinklers activated.

"We were sleeping but were woken up by the strong smell of smoke," said one Hong Kong guest. "We immediately fled."

The fire was put out in about 10 minutes. Two women and a fireman were taken to hospital for observation after suffering smoke inhalation.

It was believed the duct overheated, causing the fire. There were no suspicious circumstances, firemen said.

The hotel arranged for guests to move to other hotels.

A member of the front desk said the hotel was back to normal in the morning.

"No facilities were damaged. It was a minor incident."

The 212-room hotel is popular with mainland and Hong Kong tourists. It was almost full over Christmas.

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