

The library of hope

KAKTAAO46: In a century-old fishing village of less than 5,000 people, a library has come to life, thanks to the combined efforts of the local community, volunteers and donors, making it something close to miraculous in a world that is more connected to the cyber-universe than the written word. Liew Suet Fun ventures into Kuala Sepetang on a sweltering afternoon to discover the reason for this rarity

I HAVE the instructions on a text message: "Walk across the bridge to *guay gang* (cross the river in Hokkien), turn left and walk until the end. You will see the building".

The instructions led to a concrete footbridge built in 2013, linking Pekan Lama, Kampung Seberang, to the Kuala Sepetang mainland. Before this, people ferried themselves across on boats. Now, motorcycles and bicycles join the parade of pedestrians crossing the bridge.

The mainland portion of Kuala Sepetang, once called Port Weld, thrived when the first railway line,

built in 1885, brought copious amounts of tin from Taiping to be despatched by ship for smelting in Penang. At that time, Pekan Lama was a fishing settlement separated by the mouth of Sungai Sepetang.

With the bridge, life has shifted for the people. Motorcycles now roar through the narrow concrete paths that run through the village, and increased daily movement to the mainland has brought a new buzz to the community.

"There are things that have improved, like a better garbage disposal system. But it also means that it is



Besides reading and attending tuition classes, children at Kaktao46 are encouraged to play.

noisier and has more pollution," said Chua Yee Ling, 33, the area's assemblyman.

Chua and architect Teoh Chee Keong, 41, had mooted the idea of a library, Kaktao46, or "the corner lot 46", in 2013 following a dialogue with the local community.

Chua said the people spoke of their main concerns, one of which was education and the necessity to address the high dropout rate after Form 3.

As the local school only catered to children up to Form 3, they had to

move to Taiping, the nearest town, to continue their upper secondary education.

Chua attributes their failure to continue their studies to a cultural and social shift to an urban setting.

"They feel that the other kids look down on them as they come from a small village and cannot speak English or Malay very well," she said.

Chua and Teoh had known each other since 2007. They share a strong passion for community and conservation work.

After the dialogue, they began to discuss ways to address the issue.

"We decided to build a library and use it as a platform to encourage the children to read to boost their self-confidence," Teoh said.

However, before this could take place, a strong relationship had to be forged with the community.

"We spent a year building trust and relationships with the people here," Teoh said.

In 2014, a Community Art Carnival was held, involving the school and children, and effort was made to engage the local community.

They rented an old coffee shop, carried out surveys and mapping, and created a 3D model to show how the shop could be transformed into a library.

The model, built by Teoh's students at UCSI University in Cheras, was shown to the community.

"They were surprised and the owner of the shop became very excited and supportive of the idea. We decided to start work in the middle of last year," said Teoh.

Some 60 architecture students

from UCSI University spent three weeks in Pekan Lama, tearing down and building up parts of the coffee shop.

While the facade and the owner's family ancestral altar remained, the interior included a playground incorporated into the centre of the shop and the airy floors were modified to seat visitors and tourists.

Donations, such as building materials, books and shelves, came mostly from Taiping and Kuala Sepetang. The local community used their boats to deliver materials from the mainland and helped with the piling works.

All in all, Teoh reckoned that money was only spent on tools, nails, nuts, bolts and other small items. This amounted to RM30,000. During that period, he was also able to take members

of the community and students to Taiwan to gain exposure from other similar projects. Teoh himself is a graduate of Taiwan's Chung Yuan Christian University.

It has been an eventful journey, he said, but one that has just begun.

Phase one was about engaging the locals and building the library. The next phase will see them enhancing the quality of the place.

This means ensuring the constancy and consistency of the English language programmes, encouraging exchange between the children and their volunteer tutors and teachers, and engaging the local community at every opportunity.

A lot can be achieved with commitment, belief and hope. And, of course, a library in such an unexpected place may achieve unexpected things.



Kaktao46 has taken over this coffee shop.



Teoh Chee Keong