

Z WEEKLY

To be seen and heard

One NGO is involving people of all ages to help bust myths and share the real lives of autistic people and their families, Chen Xue reports.

People in Shanghai cheer for the Chinese Special Olympics team in a street interview by Green House volunteers. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



The first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens, Greece, in 1896. The first Paralympic Games took place in Rome, Italy, in 1960. What about the first Special Olympics?

"When our volunteers took to the streets to ask people about the Special Olympics, hardly anyone had heard of it," said Zheng Xingkui, 43, founder of Green House, an NGO based in Shanghai. "And among the few who did know about it, they couldn't really say the difference between the Special Olympics and Paralympics. That was frustrating."

As an organization dedicated to providing support to autistic people and their families, Green House is one of the East Asia partners of the 2023 Special Olympics World Summer Games, which is currently taking place in Berlin, Germany, from June 17 to 25.

A group of 89 Chinese athletes with an average age of 21 — the youngest being 14 — are now in Berlin, competing in 11 disciplines, including badminton, basketball, gymnastics and swimming. This is the 10th time that China has taken part in the Special Olympics — an international sporting event for athletes with intellectual disabilities that was first held in Chicago, US, in 1968.

In 2007, Shanghai hosted the Special Olympics, making China the first Asian country to host the event. And yet still, few people in China even know about its existence.

This is why, ever since Green House became a partner organization of this year's Special Olympics, its volunteers started working hard to help promote the event, with the aforementioned street interview just one component of their campaign.

Other activities also include a virtual torch-lighting relay, and training sessions with previous Chinese Special Olympics medalists.

In fact, Green House's volunteers have long been organizing different activities on a daily basis to raise public awareness of the lives of autistic people and their families.

Ni Aishan, 19, a student at Shanghai International Studies University and Green House volunteer, once supervised the production of a graduation song project in her high school and proposed to create a song for autistic children and post it online so that more people could learn about the children's stories and the challenges they face.

"We're a social-media-savvy generation. We're sensitive to what's trending and familiar with how the internet works, which means we are best at spreading information online and helping public welfare projects reach more people," said Ni.

Lu Yajie, 22, an industrial design major at Tongji University in Shanghai, is working on a class project to design a futuristic device that helps shield autistic children from excessive stimuli from the outside world. After she joined Green

House earlier this year, she proposed the idea of organizing a jogging event for autistic kids and their parents so that they could get out of the house and get closer to nature and society.

"Doing my class project, I realized how little people know about autism. Many of my peers and even my professors believe that autism is

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a mental illness, but in fact, it's a developmental disability," said Lu. "When it comes to raising people's awareness, no efforts are too small."

Xia Xiuyuan is about to start college this fall. Last month, the 18-year-old was part of the volunteer group doing the street interview for the Special Olympics. Instead of being discouraged by the fact that most of the passersby didn't know about it, Xia would actively introduce the event to them and share general knowledge about autism.

"The media tends to portray autistic people as a group of geniuses, which is one-sided and misleading," said Xia, making her determined to share with people the other side of the story.

Zhang Bopei, 13, a student at Shanghai Xiangming Junior High School, took part in a volunteer activity with Green House playing flag football with autistic kids. His job was to explain the rules and help the children play the game. And although he was roughly the same age as most of the autistic kids taking part, it wasn't an issue for Zhang.

"I don't think only grown-ups can participate in public welfare projects. Students of all ages — from college right down to primary school — should all get involved," he said. "Only this way can we include and influence more people."

We keep saying that people should have more understanding and tolerance of autistic people, said Green House's founder Zheng, "but that's probably too far a goal for now. People need to see them first."

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Gen Z Stats

Seeing anxiety philosophically

This is an extract of the Survey Report on the Social Mentality of Young Chinese Netizens (2022) conducted by Fudan Development Institute's Center for Communication and State Governance Research, the Global Communication All Media Research Institute of Fudan University, Bilibili Public Policy Research Institute and the Shanghai Information Security and Social Management Innovation Laboratory. The report surveyed a total of 5,492 young netizens across China in 2021 and 2022.

New ways to cope

Data from Sina Weibo shows that study and work are the biggest triggers of anxiety for young netizens today, followed by health and appearance. Among those surveyed, 77 percent of them clearly stated that they felt anxious about study or work, significantly higher than those reporting suffering from anxiety related to health and appearance, 30 percent and 18 percent, respectively.

When it comes to gender differences, young women expressed more anxiety than their male counterparts.

In terms of education level, young netizens with a master's degree or above were more anxious than those with a bachelor, junior college, high school or middle school degree, indicating that "the more academically successful someone is, the more anxiety he or she suffers".

Some young netizens have developed a unique way to cope with anxiety — online "praying", which is part of a popular phenomenon known as the new metaphysics. For example, they would repost auspicious images and emojis online while writing down their wishes about wealth, education, relationships and health, among others. They believe in personality theories and matchmaking tests. They would look to horoscopes to find out their career prospects or overall fortune. They pay attention to when Mercury is in retrograde — a time they believe brings back luck. They also follow bloggers who share tips and "prophecies" and make divination rituals such as drawing and reading Tarot cards to feel that they have more control over the things they're anxious about.

According to Sina Weibo, young netizens' favorable attitudes toward this new metaphysics grew slightly between 2021 and 2022. Among the 5,492 young people surveyed, 749 showed a positive attitude toward it in 2022, accounting for 13 percent, 1 percentage point higher than 2021's 12 percent. A logistic regression analysis of dichotomous variables of young netizens' attitudes toward new metaphysics revealed that youth in China's eastern areas are the least likely to rely on new metaphysics while those in central

provinces are the most likely to do so. It also found that women were more likely to believe in new metaphysics, and that people born after 2000 are more likely to rely on new metaphysics to help relieve anxiety compared to those born in the 1990s.

A network analysis of millions of related video comments on Bilibili showed that online comment sections have become an important outlet for today's youth to relieve anxiety. On anonymous social platforms, young internet users can seek empathy and reassurance through communication. Some also share their experiences or offer support and comfort to anxious strangers.

Working on it

In 2022, young netizens generally held a positive attitude toward working hard. The number of people who supported "lying flat" — a state where people just settle for what they have now and don't wish to work harder for more — was lower than that of those who didn't. Sina Weibo data showed that, among the survey respondents who clearly stated their attitudes, 56 percent of them explicitly opposed the life choice of lying flat, indicating that lying flat advocates are still a minority.

The network analysis of millions of related video comments on Bilibili shows that young netizens are reflecting on education and that they have a social mentality of "working hard while being anxious". The motto of "education can change one's fate" remains popular in secondary education, but some students may experience a sense of loss and disorientation after finally making it through the gruelling college entrance examination, or gaokao, to enter university. However, many young netizens still believe in hard work and are willing to work hard so that they can hold their future in their own hands. They oppose the misuse of the term "rat race" and encourage each other by writing positive comments online.



A recent survey shows that young people generally hold a positive attitude toward working hard. TUCHONG

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