

LIFE

Residents of Guangnei Street in Beijing's Xicheng district have come to celebrate Du Xiaojie as a fixture of their community. They've grown fond of the 30-something, who has enlivened their lives over the past four years since he founded a cultural center on the street. His space has evolved into a hot spot among neighbors, who go there to read, play instruments and dance.

"They treat me like their close friend and often give me feedback about their experiences at the center, which helps me make improvements," Du says.

He usually arrives early in the morning to sort books and prepare events. He was still working according to a tight schedule, even as Spring Festival approached.

"Actually, we get busier when the holidays come," he says.

Since the neighborhood's children are on their winter semester break, Du has made a point of arranging more science popularization and handicraft classes.

"We're offering four to five classes a day in science, traditional culture and art," he says.

He invites experts to host the courses, which can be booked through social media for free.

"Each class attracts 120 to 180 people a day," Du says.

During the winter break, it usually takes only a few minutes before all the slots are booked.

The center has welcomed more than 380,000 visitors since it was founded in 2019.

"This figure has been uplifting to team morale," he says.

Many people from the area have made the programs part of their lives, he adds.

The municipal publicity department named him a Beijing Role Model in December in recognition of the role his entrepreneurship has played in enriching cultural life in the city over the past decade.

Trying trials

It has also shed light on touching legacies from Du's past and the consequential motivations that few of his friends or partners knew about.

Du came to the capital from a small village in Yantai in East China's Shandong province.

As a child, his family faced adversity since his mother lived with cerebellar atrophy, leaving her unable to care for herself. This unfortunate turn of events plunged his family into hardship.

Undeterred by the challenges, Du embarked on a journey to reshape his destiny through education. His academic efforts bore fruit in 2004, when he enrolled in the School of Arts at the Renmin University of China, where he specialized in digital media.

The financial constraints at home spurred him to juggle part-time work and student loans to finish his degree. In 2008, he managed to venture further into the realm of creative expression as a graduate student at Beijing Jiaotong University.

As a graduate, Du responded to the city's call for college students to launch entrepreneurship programs. "We started a company to help universities and cultural enterprises to make and edit videos," Du says.

This also enabled him to make extra money to support his family and himself.

However, just as life was starting to improve in 2010, his father had a stroke. This, once again, disrupted the strides Du was making in life.

He had to postpone graduation and went home to take care of his dad for three months. After his father left emergency care, Du decided to take him to Beijing for rehabilitation, and he hired a caretaker to tend to his mother at home. "That was the hardest time of my life," Du says, adding that he carried all the pressure of caring for his parents and finishing school on his shoulders.

His video business shut down in his absence, and he spent all his savings on medical expenses.

Media picked up on his story in 2012, recounting how he had to bring his father all the way back to Beijing for treatment.

Soon after, Du received about 2,000 calls from good Samaritans.

However, he only accepted one offer which helped him get an appointment with a well-known doctor and a hospital bed for his father. He says he tactfully rejected all the financial aid.

"I felt as if I have two hands, I should be capable of dealing with all the challenges coming my way," he says.

The heartwarming messages carried Du through this rough patch, and helped him decide to



A sense of service

Beijing has recognized a man from rural Shandong for his public welfare work at his community center in the capital, **Yang Feiyue** reports.



"Public welfare work can be addictive. You feel needed because parents are very touched and feel that their children have received help, so they trust us. It's a sense of shared accomplishment."

Du Xiaojie, public welfare enthusiast

potent curiosity about ancient architecture during an event at a temple in the neighborhood.

"She was very interested in the explanations. She and other kids listened attentively and engaged in serious discussions with the teachers afterward," says Wang, who lives about a 15-minute motorbike ride away.

"When my daughter got home, she reviewed the information she'd learned and summarized it on her own."

Wang signed her daughter up for all six sessions at the temple, after which the girl was chosen as a young tour guide to explain the site to visitors with confidence.

The girl went on to join the rocket science class and made her own models, and learned about the Earth's composition and the food chain.

"I found that the children's interest in science is much stronger than I imagined. I'm very grateful to Du and his team for providing such a good learning environment," Wang says.

The center's curator, Yao Mengqi, has worked alongside Du for years and considers him to be a man of many talents.

"When unexpected problems emerge during projects, he can always handle them quickly," she says.

Yao says she and her colleagues only came to understand Du's motivation after the award spotlighted his past.

"He pays attention to employees' feelings, identifies the reasons behind their emotions and is willing to help solve their difficulties," Yao says.

"Perhaps, it's because he has been through the rain himself, that he's willing to hold an umbrella for others."

As the cultural center gets good reviews, more companies, including Chinese tech giant ByteDance, have sought Du's services in organizing public welfare events.

"Public welfare work can be addictive. You feel needed because parents are very touched and feel that their children have received help, so they trust us. It's a sense of shared accomplishment," Du says.

"I feel that Beijing is for all entrepreneurs. According to my own experience, the city welcomes anyone with open arms."

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pursue public welfare.

"Back in school, I always enjoyed helping others because I came from a rural area, where people are accustomed to helping one another," Du says.

He believed that people would only accept him — a man from the countryside, overwhelmed by big city life — if he was genuinely helpful and sincere.

"Beijing was so big to me. I felt like I could make a mistake with every word I uttered," Du says, recalling his early times in the capital.

He would prepare the large drawing papers and boards his classmates used for their courses and make his college roommates' beds.

After graduation, Du threw himself into designing and carrying out public welfare projects to allow institutions of higher learning and companies to live up to their social responsibilities, such as those in rural areas of the Inner Mongolia and Xizang autonomous regions.

A perfect project

An opportunity knocked in 2017, when Du learned that a dance hall in Xicheng needed to be trans-

formed into a civic cultural center.

"It was a dream project for me," Du says.

The transformation was a public welfare project and fitted his art education background.

So, he and his team of 20 young people immediately began preparing to bid against big State-owned enterprises.

"I knew the only chance I had was to fall back on my previous charity experience and deliver a detailed plan that could really solve the residents' problems," Du says.

He and his team submitted a proposal that was "as thick as a brick" — in sharp contrast to his competitors, whose renovation plans featured a few pages on average.

Du's plan eventually won the hearts of the judges, and he wasted no time turning the 1,860-square-meter space into the Guangnei Street cultural center.

"Our advantage was that we knew many experts in various fields, who we could invite to give lectures," Du says.

He has contacts with more than 100 experts in various fields, most of whom are from the Chinese Acade-

Top left: Beijing Jiaotong University volunteers talk about teenage psychology with residents at Du Xiaojie's cultural center in the capital's Xicheng district.

Top right: An expert demonstrates rocket science to kids at a temple in Xicheng. **Middle:** Du shows a child scientific devices. **Above left:** Children experience shadow puppets at the cultural center. **Above right:** National Space Science Center expert Liu Yong gives a lecture to residents at the center.

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my of Sciences, or are professors at institutes of higher learning, including Peking University and the Beijing Normal University. This network is the result of his relentless inquiries about their availabilities and their willingness to talk about their fields.

When local children wanted to watch shadow-puppet plays, he invited Fan Weiguo, a seventh-generation inheritor of Taishan shadow puppetry from Shandong province, to perform. When they expressed curiosity about outer space, he invited Liu Yong, a researcher at the National Space Science Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, to give lectures. Du also brought well-known traditional opera actors to perform for elderly residents.

Leading primary schoolteachers and principals also joined forces with the cultural center to offer parents advice about raising children.

As such, Du has come to serve residents of all age groups.

Eager engagement

Wang Liding takes her daughter to the center at least once a week. She was surprised by her child's