

Girl learnt to write her name at Agape School

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by **Ng Jing Yng**

It started out with just four students, but through word-of-mouth, the class grew in numbers.

Agape School for the Deaf was founded in August 2004 by Filipino couple Nelson and Rowena Fernandez, who came to Timor Leste to start a church in 2001.

A lack of funding and the civil war four years ago have rocked the school's sustainability several times. Even now, Mrs Fernandez, 52, said they are looking for a permanent place, due to issues with the local landlord.

She knows how important the school is for students such as Ivonia Fatimah Guterres, who would be unable to cope with a mainstream school syllabus. Ivonia's mother Maria Faria Saldanha, 47, said: "She'll be angry if no one takes her to school."

Madam Saldanha discovered her youngest child's disability at age one, when she did not respond to calls.

It broke her heart to know there was no cure, but after Ivonia started attending the Agape school last year, "she not only learnt how to write her name but others' names as well".

Under the Agape Foundation for Asia Pacific Ministries set up by the Fernandez couple, there is also a kindergarten for those living in the villages in the mountains, with school fees highly subsidised.

To make a donation - cash or in kind - to the Agape Foundation, please email Mrs Fernandez at nelson2et@yahoo.com. For volunteering opportunities with the Singapore International Foundation, visit <http://www.sif.org.sg>. Ng Jing Yng

A quiet class, but a satisfying experience

S'porean volunteer teaches at Dili's first hearing-impaired school

by **Ng Jing Yng**

DILI (Timor Leste) - She got up shyly from her seat and walked to the shiny Apple notebook at her teacher's table.

Ivonia Fatimah Guterres, 9, hesitated a little, glanced back at her classmates, then gently keyed in an answer to the arithmetic question flashed on the projector.

Encouraging smiles flashed -the little girl was correct. Her peers then looked eagerly at their teacher, ready for the next question.

It may be the quietest class in all of Timor Leste, but the enthusiasm of these 23 students - from as young as eight to 39 years old - is palpable.

They go to Dili's first hearing-impaired school, where they can learn at their own pace and finally belong to a community, if not a safe refuge, for themselves.

Agape School for the Deaf is also where their Singaporean teacher Alvan Yap, 33, has spent the last seven months.

Mr Yap is also hearing-impaired and taught in Singapore's School for the Deaf for five years, He is now in Dili as a Singapore International Foundation volunteer.

With his arrival, the students can now attend classes five days a week instead of three previously, when there was a lack of manpower. Communication is done through hand signals and gestures as the students learn to use sign language.