

Our heritage is in our hands UNESCO WHV campaigns at Lalbagh Fort

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A bundle of balloons flew into the air, marking the opening ceremony of the World Heritage Volunteer (WHV) Campaign at the 17th century Mughal structure, Lalbagh Fort. Fifteen volunteers clad in orange T-shirts zipped around the site, delivering boxes of food, taking pictures and bestowing bouquets.

This year, UNESCO WHV accepted Lalbagh Fort in Old Dhaka to be a part of their education programme. They annually select several vulnerable points of interest around the world in hopes to build a bridge between different generations and people through cultural preservation. The fundamental idea behind the projects is that culture is “non-renewable”. Lalbagh is the only site in Bangladesh on this year’s list of landmarks.

President and CEO of The Education and Cultural Society (ECS), Kazi Nasrin Siddiqa, managed the 10-day event to raise awareness of the importance of taking care of Lalbagh and other assets in the country.

ECS is a local, non-profit organisation established in 2010. They introduced “Service Learning”, a method of combining academics with community service, to several institutions with the approval of the concerned authorities. They also started 30 science and environmental clubs across Bangladesh. ECS works closely in underprivileged areas and they have been pioneers in promoting STEM education in Bangladesh. Their ultimate agenda is to empower the young, which is how Siddiqa found UNESCO WHV.

The UNESCO WHV campaign consists of volunteers between 18 and 30 years old working towards making 50 heritage sites in 32 countries permanent UNESCO World Heritage sites. Currently, Lalbagh is on the tentative list. The event involved and brought together young people, some even from outside Bangladesh. The 15 volunteers came from all different types of universities, schools for medicine, even



engineering colleges, and they have had varying levels of prior experience with volunteer work. “It is something different and something new,” said volunteer Rakhia Sultana Ishita. “We want to represent our culture. Let’s save this.”

Over the course of 10 days, the volunteers completed team building activities, had constructive discussions with university students, taught their own students not to pollute landmarks that should be preserved, went to seminars on the importance of volunteerism and even visited other heritage sites like

Dhakeshwari Temple, Armenian Church, Tara Mosque, Hussaini Dalan and Gurdwara Nanak Shahi to take in the powerful image of religious harmony through cultural places.

However, preserving points of interest in Dhaka, Bangladesh is no easy task. Guest of honour of the opening ceremony, Chargé d’Affaires of the US Embassy, Joel Reifman, explained that “environmental degradation, socio-economic pressures, urbanisation and the strains of tourism” contribute to the difficulty in preserving culture. Chief

guest, Cultural Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Noor, added that there are financial problems behind preservation as well. He said that the culture of Bangladesh lies truly in people.

“Bangladeshis love music, they love painting, they love the theatre. For the sake of love, they provide voluntary service to preserve our heritage. It is in our culture.”

Despite struggles, volunteers seemed to achieve what they intended and had a positive experience. Volunteer Miller Zhou from China said that he was touched by the kindness of people in Bangladesh and he intends to take knowledge of Bangladesh back home with him, as well as bring volunteers and tourists back to Bangladesh. According to volunteer Atika Ibnat Shafa, locals were so impacted by the workshops that some promised to keep Lalbagh clean and prevent others from causing destruction at the site. Siddiqa’s goal of using this event to start a domino effect of volunteerism proved successful, as the volunteers enjoyed the experience and felt inspired to do more in the future.

“If I have love for my motherland and want to bring a positive change, I have to work hard and keep patience,” said volunteer Shah Neawaz Chowdhury. “No matter how much time it takes, I believe I can achieve my goal.”

SHOUT was the Youth Engagement Partner of the event.

