

City of Joy—Kolkata, India Summer of Service, 2017 Jennifer Park

This summer, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to work with the Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata, India. In the very short 10 weeks that I spent there, I learned about humility and true happiness by embodying Mother Teresa’s call to serve the poorest of the poor.

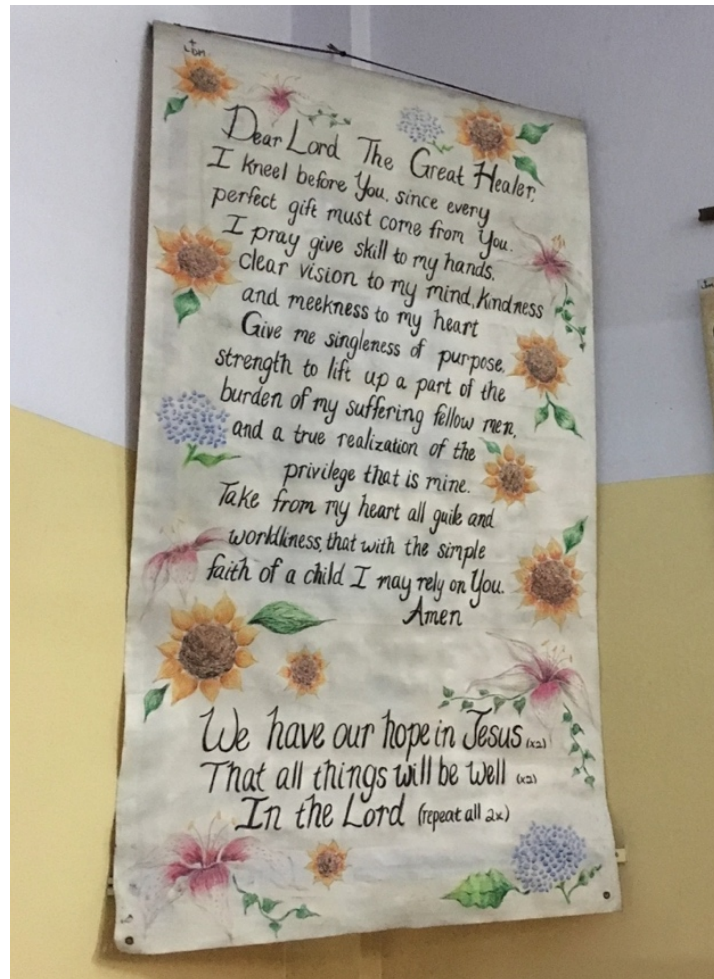
Immediately after we landed, we were surrounded by sounds and smells that were foreign to us. It was difficult to wrap my head around the chaos that unfolded in front of my eyes: the lack of traffic laws, people eating, bathing, sleeping in the streets, children running around the unkempt streets begging strangers for money, and last but not least, the symphony of foreign and familiar noises. It seemed as if we were in the heart of a never-ending competition for who can make the most noise. Between the revving of the motorcycle/car engines, honking of the tricycle-carrier horns, the loud, high-pitched beeps of auto rickshaw horns, the conductors hanging out of moving busses screaming the names of the final bust stops with wads of money folded between their fingers, the loud speaker announcements notifying those who practiced Islam that it was time to pray— it was a competition that nobody wanted to lose.



Auto rickshaws in traffic with the phrase "Obey the traffic rules" printed on its back. Despite this, nobody seemed to follow the traffic laws in the busy streets of Kolkata.

During my time in Kolkata, I was assigned to work at Prem Dan in the mornings and at Shishu Bhavan in the afternoons. Prem Dan was the second home of the destitute and dying, housing close to 350 residents who are sick, or abandoned by their families. Shishu Bhavan was the orphanage for infants and children who were either abandoned or given up by their parents because they cannot afford to keep them. A few days into serving at these homes I sat down in complete physical, mental and emotional exhaustion and wondered, “how could this city possibly be called the city of joy?” Despite my initial struggles, by the end of the trip, I could not think of a better name for the city of Kolkata as it left my heart filled with so much joy that it made it so difficult for me to leave.

Each morning we woke and went to mass at 6 am, which was followed by breakfast comprised of eggs, bread and bananas. Following breakfast, all of the volunteers got together to pray with Sr. Mercy Maria and Sr. Margaret before listening to the daily announcements and then headed off to our respective service sites.



The morning prayer we prayed each morning before heading off to our service sites. I hold this prayer close to my heart because it served as a reminder of the virtues of service—kindness, humility, faith and hope.

One of my favorite parts about working at Prem Dan was the morning commute because I was truly able to see and experience the daily lives of the locals. Each morning, our commute consisted of a 30-minute walk through the busy streets of Kolkata. The streets were filled with vendors selling everything from fruits and vegetables to shoes and clothes.



A fruit and vegetable vendor weighing some mangos using a scale and free weights. He and others like him brought fresh produce to sell each morning, rain or shine (even during monsoon season).

We passed by locals getting their morning groceries, children being walked to school, people going to pray to their gods, men getting their rickshaws ready for a long day's work, and much more. We also passed through the railroad tracks, which is where the small community of impoverished families lived, comprised of homes made from dirt, newspapers and other objects that managed to hold it all together. As soon as they caught sight of us, the children ran around shouting "hello" and "chocolate" with huge smiles on their faces. It was eye-opening to see the huge disparity between those who were better off and those who were impoverished. Despite this, the men, women and children were eager to greet us with hellos.

Mornings at Prem Dan consisted of washing and hanging laundry, washing down the facility, making each of the 100+ beds and washing the cement floors outside. At about 9 am, you could see us drenched in sweat under the sweltering Kolkata sun— some of us passing buckets filled with water and others scrubbing the floors outside using brooms and squeegees.



Each morning, we were responsible for washing the concrete outside of the facility. The volunteers and mashis worked together to pass buckets of water, sweep and squeegee the excess water into the drains.

After cleaning, we had the chance to interact with the residents. We danced with them, gave them massages, painted their nails, and tried to speak with them and listen to what they had to say despite the language barrier. While the language barrier was quite difficult to overcome, I quickly learned how to communicate non-verbally (which consisted of a lot of guessing and checking) and react to non-verbal cues. I also learned the universal nature of a simple smile. Acts of kindness and compassion surpassed all language barriers (among volunteers and between volunteers and residents/mashis). Soon, I learned the names of the residents, their stories, and their quirks. I spent everyday with them, massaging their aching shoulders, listening to their stories, helping them eat, tucking them into bed before leaving and without realizing, I had grown to love them more than I had ever imagined.



Rinky mashi (left), Jennifer (middle), and Josephine (right) with a chandelier we made together using beads and fishing lines.

Despite circumstances, they were always smiling and eager to laugh, dance and sing to the music. They were eager to ask how I was doing, making sure that I was acclimating to the city of Kolkata. Some even offered me the little food that they had, which for me was a true example of unconditional love. Their attitude towards life served as a true inspiration and motivation for me to show the same unconditional love to others. Their smiles and happiness were infectious, and showed me the arbitrary nature of worldly desires, which seems to be the root of unhappiness in the first world.

In the afternoons, I had the privilege of working with the toddlers of Shishu Bhavan. Each afternoon, we changed the sheets in the cribs and made their beds. Then we headed over to the children to feed them their daily snacks which ranged from varieties of sweets, to chips to cake. After snack time, the children were brought to the play room to play with the toys, consisting of plush toys, Lego blocks and toy cars, little toy balls, etc. Like all children, they were eager to play with the toys but were not so keen on sharing. Some of them would fight over not only the toys but for the attention of the volunteers. Because we were not allowed to hold the children or allow them to sit on our laps, I couldn't help but feel helpless. Though they were fighting for attention, I could not give them the affection they wanted and needed.



Cribs in Shishu Bhavan where all of the children slept. They were given a sheet and a pillow and slept underneath ceiling fans. The beds were made every afternoon following nap-time.

On my first day at Shishu Bhavan, I was greeted with beautiful children who were eager to be loved. These children were bright, beautiful and full of potential. It was difficult fighting the urge to hug them constantly and never let them go. The first few days at Shishu Bhavan was difficult because it hurt me to see that these sweet children had been abandoned by their parents. I knew that one day I would have to leave them too, which made me filled me with an overwhelming sense of guilt. What separated me from them? Why was I chosen to live my life and them theirs? My privileges were not earned but given simply because I was blessed with the family that I was given. It made me realize how much I took my privileges for granted when I watched these children fight for a small percentage of attention from the mashis and volunteers. Despite all of this, the children were always filled with joy. When we walked through the doors, they screamed “auntie! auntie!” and greeted us smiles, eager to play. Despite circumstances, they were laughing and playing and goofing around as much as the next child. Their innocence and the joy that came from it inspired me to come back every day.



Children of Shishu Bhavan during play time. The younger children played with toys indoors while the older children played outside in the playground.

When I left for Kolkata, I went in with the expectation that I would not be able to change the world with my short-term service trip. However, I did not expect how much I would take back from the city of Kolkata and the people I met during my time there. While my initial motive for volunteering was to give and serve those who needed my help, but now it is apparent that I needed their help much more than they needed mine. In the short two months that I spent in Kolkata, I felt the essence of true happiness in the women and the children that I had privilege of working with. They've filled my heart with a sense of joy, humility and and gratitude, and I hope to do the same for those back at home. As Mother said, Kolkata exists all over the world, even where the "poverty" is not as visible as it is in Kolkata. I hope to continue to embody what I've learned during my time in Kolkata and carry them with me as I continue to serve others.