

My Summer of Service:

Kolkata, India

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My classmates (from left to right) Niki Wadhwa, Jennifer Park, Kathryn Fortune, Kristiana Hanna and I outside of the Motherhouse of the Missionaries of Charity. Every morning, most volunteers would meet at the Motherhouse for announcements. Mother Teresa's tomb was also located inside. Mass was held every morning on the second floor.

As the plane landed in Kolkata, I knew my time in the 'City of Joy' would not be what I had expected. After my classmates, Jennifer and Kathryn, and I got to the Motherhouse after a rather scary "taxi" ride, we relaxed after our two day journey and met up with our other classmates, Niki and Kristiana, who had already been in India a few weeks before we arrived. The strong volunteer community, the work we did, and attending daily 6 am mass and evening adoration really grounded me, put things into perspective, and helped calm and tune out the hectic and boisterous scenes of Kolkata- the pushing and shoving, continuous honking, strange smells, garbage everywhere, people bathing in the streets, the frequent staring, etc.



On the walk to Prem Dan, the train tracks cut through the slums, characterized by several closely packed "homes." Children would often be found sitting in the dark inside each home playing with each other. Garbage covered the dirt paths and during the monsoon season, they would become rivers of muddy, unsanitary water.

The poverty in some areas, especially the slums by the train tracks, shocked me, even though I had already expected them. In some ways, what I had pictured was worse, but in other ways, I didn't realize just how small some living spaces were. What surprised me was how happy some of the people in these areas were, especially the smiling mothers and children that would greet the volunteers as we walked by. It was also hard to see how the wealth gaps within the different areas of Kolkata existed. Just a few minutes walking from the slums of the train tracks was a Westernized mall with its fancy interior and expensive stores.



Left: Puja (far left), Rosemary (middle), and Angel (far right) of Daya Dan enjoying a teeter-totter ride. Once the children started school, I started going to Daya Dan in the afternoons to see the kids. I helped with homework and feeding, and played with the kids for the remainder of the shift.

Right: Nikhil, one of the boys at Daya Dan, placing a crown on my head! In the afternoons, I sometimes volunteered on the boys' floor and got to know the boys pretty well. On Saturday mornings, the boys and girls got to play together at the park.

My assigned morning shift was Daya Dan, a house for mentally and physically disabled children between the ages of around 4- 25. It was first at Daya Dan that I learned to open my heart to love and care more. I became close with most of the children, some of the massies, and the sisters in charge of the girls floor. Soon, they knew and remembered my name. I tried to love all the kids as much as I could. Tasks ranged from singing nursery rhymes, helping those that couldn't walk on their own walk, making their beds, doing the laundry, and feeding the kids that couldn't feed themselves. Despite the disabilities the children had, they were so precious, loving, and smart in their own way.

I even had the opportunity to volunteer at the dispensary at Daya Dan. I helped clean and wrap wounds, distribute medicine, and check patients who came from the neighborhood in and out. It was a great experience overall





A fellow volunteer and I outside of Kalighat (Nirmal Hriday). We weren't allowed to take pictures inside to respect the patients' privacy.

For my afternoon shift, I went to Kalighat- Mother Teresa's home of the elderly, destitute, and dying. It was definitely challenging for me. On my first day, those two hours seemed like an eternity. I was not prepared for what I saw. The women were quietly sitting in their seats around the tables waiting for their food. The massies immediately told me to massage powder on the womens' necks and backs. After I was finished, I was running around getting "pani" (water) for all the women and taking them to the "toilet." We also had time to walk to each bed and talk to the women. After feeding the women and putting them back to bed, my exhausting two hour shift was finally over. On our way home, my fellow volunteers and I asked each other about our first day at Kalighat. I no longer wanted to work at Kalighat. However, one of the volunteers was shocked that I would want to switch after just my first day, and convinced me to give it more of a shot. Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into a month. I soon realized that I cared for these women deeply and was very happy to work there. After I extended my time in Kolkata, I even started doing my morning shifts there. The atmosphere was much livelier in the mornings.



Left: Sister John Paul and I standing in front of Mother Teresa's portrait on the girl's floor of Daya Dan. We became very close throughout my 8 weeks at Daya Dan.

Right: Nisha (on my left) and Mithali (on my right) gave me a thank you card and a necklace. I spent a lot of time with the two of them, especially helping them with homework in the afternoons.

Saying goodbye was so hard for me. I gave the people I served my heart and my dedication. I tried to provide them what they needed. I hope they saw and felt that- whether that be in the clean clothes they wore, the freshly made beds they slept in, the extra runs around the park at their request (despite being exhausted and sweaty), the "helicopter" rides, or the plenty of hugs and kisses I gave. They also showed me love back (well, some of them at least) through their smiles, hugs and kisses, and/or bothering to know and remember my name. But in the end, I know I took more from them than they took from me. They taught me to be more patient and humble, love unconditionally, listen, and communicate better.



Me on my last day with all of the girls of Daya Dan and some of the Massies. The children, staff, sisters, and other volunteers had just sung the Farewell song. It was very emotional.

On my last day, as the children, the massies, the sisters, and the other volunteers at Daya Dan sang to me, I let my emotions take over and cried my eyes out. My heart broke at the reality of having to leave them after two months. I wasn't going to be able to see or hear Rosemary say "tickle, tickle," Leema giggle in her adorable, nasally way, Nisha and Mithali always asking me about Fatima, Priyanka asking for helicopter rides, and Angel's adorable smile. As we were taking pictures, some of the girls told me, "don't cry, come back." Taking those words, I hope to make it back to the City of Joy sometime.

Dhonnobad, Kolkata!

