

Going Back Home
Royapuram, India
Summer of Service 2017
Padmaja Sundaram



For my Summer of Service, I chose to go back to the state where I was born, and work with the Missions of Charity in Royapuram, Tamil Nadu, India. This experience, of giving back to my home, but also learning the true meaning of service, is an experience that will stay with me forever. It has both humbled me, as well as given me a new found drive to pursue a career in medicine.



The site was an orphanage, where children of various ages, where children were either found, left at the doorstep, or even just given to the orphanage by parents who could not afford their children. However, despite their plight, this was one of the happiest and most hopeful environments I had ever been in- sisters and workers alike played and took care of these children as if they were their own.

My primary duty was to take care of the boys, especially those that were severely disabled. It had been my first interaction with kids handicapped to this extent- they could not speak, walk, communicate, control their bowels, and suddenly had seizures. I was terrified to interact with them at first- how does one take care of someone so different! But by the end, these boys won my heart- somewhere, along feeding them, bathing them, dressing them, giving them medicine, even taking them to bathroom, through expression through random noises, smiles and slight movements, I connected with them in the most profound way.



However, I also helped teach the other girls and the less disabled children English, math, and Tamil, the native language. I hadn't been assigned this role, but the playful children dragged me along, and I went willingly. I have so many fond memories taking them to school, telling them stories, and playing outside. It was truly inspirational to be around possibly the most happiest children I have ever seen—despite their plight, they always took time out of their day to wish me good morning, make sure I ate, and even compliment the way I look, just to make me smile. It was their selfless acts that taught me what “selfless service” truly meant.





However, life wasn't always fun and games- my summer also included witness such sorrow and pain, and seeing how cruel the world can be to the innocent. Once a week, we would walk around the streets of Royapuram, searching for children that were abandoned, or taking care of those in need of medical assistance. Thankfully a majority of the time, it was the latter necessary. However, around my fifth week volunteering, we found Deepa, a 1 year old infant thrown away in a garbage ditch. She had sustained several injuries due to garbage and other objects being thrown onto her, suffered from dehydration and malnourishment, as well as a severe infection. She had been abandoned due to having a cleft palate. Unfortunately, we had gotten to her too late, and she passed away a few days later. She was the first death had witnessed, and it was difficult processing how and why this could happen. I am not sure I have a grasp on it now.





Other children that the site finds, however are more fortunate. It was breathtaking to see the doctor on site, with the help of volunteers, nurse the sickest child back to health, using the sparse medicine and amenities they had. This was the most eye-opening experience, to see people treating children on what was almost motherly instinct- other than the doctor who came occasionally, no one was medically trained, but they took amazing care of all children, disabled and abled. They demonstrated what it truly meant to be connected with their patients.



In short, the experience I had here will forever be seared in my mind and in my heart. I will never forget the amazing people I met along the way- Sister Deepthi, my fellow workers, and especially Ananya- the girl that called out to me every morning calling me “Amma” or Mother. I was taken out of my comfort zone in so many ways- I was fully speaking my mother tongue, Tamil, taking care of children in dire need, seeing the struggles of medicine in rural areas, and dealing with unexpected life circumstances. Despite this, I thrived here, because it was a place filled with true love. The experiences, the people, the lessons- all has ignited a passion in me to continue in Mother Theresa’s footsteps, and take care of people in a time of need in anyway that I can. It I wasn’t able to completely to cure them, and am not sure if I made a huge lasting difference in their lives, but I am positive that they made a big difference in mine.

