

Ashley Paul, '11

Kolkata, India

Before I left for Kolkata, India, someone had warned me that what I'll see there will move my heart to want to do something, but that I wouldn't be able to change what I see. It's true that I had never felt a deeper sense of frustration at what I encountered every day on the streets. I'll never forget the man who brought us to our hotel on a cycle rickshaw - a common means of transportation in this great sprawling city - and charged us Rs. 300 for a Rs. 15 ride. At first I felt so angry that we were cheated so badly, and that so many others who offered various services and goods tried to do the same as well. Where was the value for honesty? But then, over the course of seven weeks, I began to understand it from their eyes. There was a certain kind of desperation, the need to go on living day by day, and the fact of the matter is, they didn't know any other life style. It was most difficult to see children doing the same thing, learning these cruel means of survival. My friend was right; I, a simple undergraduate student, did not have the means to change society. Not alone anyhow. It was simultaneously frustrating and humbling to know that for some reason, I was lucky. I had a loving family and all sorts of opportunities that many of the children I met did not. And why? I did not earn my privileges, but I was blessed to have them anyway while these children simply weren't so lucky.



Despite this unjust fact of life, the children I worked with at the orphanage did not share my deep sense of injustice. Every day, it impressed upon me just how happy they were in spite of their misfortunes. Alongside Katie Ruzzo, I worked for the Missionaries of Charity, an organization of sisters that worked hard to ease the suffering of the poor and the needy of Kolkata. They had several houses where they took in people off the streets. One of the houses where I volunteered was called Daya Dan, an orphanage for physically and mentally handicapped children. The home had two floors, one for boys and one for girls. I helped to take care of twenty-five boys on the first floor every morning. We began with making beds, washing and hanging laundry off the roof to dry under the sweltering sun, and then morning prayer. After prayers, the boys went for meditation, led by the director of Daya Dan, Sister Jonafa. During meditation, the rest of the volunteers made lesson plans for the boys, consisting of math, reading, writing, and communication skills. Each child had different needs; Rama was still trying to learn his alphabet while Binoy could do basic addition and subtraction. Some of the boys had autism, cerebral palsy, or no clear diagnosis. Many of them had been abandoned or given away by their parents, unable to afford the healthcare these children needed, or ignorant in how to take care of a child with disabilities. Each of us was assigned to a particular boy to teach. I had the opportunity to work with several boys, and each of them had touched me in different ways. To this day, Katie and I affectionately imitate each boy's typical behavior because in spite of their handicaps, all of them had such unique personalities.



The boy that I worked with the most was a rather thin ten year old boy named Bernard. Bernard was wheel chaired bound, and it appeared that he had polio. In addition, he had a speech impediment and initially, it was difficult to communicate with

him. But eventually it became easier as I got used to his pronunciation, and hand gestures. I tried to adjust my teaching strategies according to what worked best for Bernard. At times it was down right frustrating, trying to overcome each boy's problems, trying to maintain discipline, and wondering just how much we were getting through to them. When I described the experience to a friend of mine, he had said that he didn't think he would have been able to do it. I replied, "Sure you could. Simply because you come to love them so much!"



In the afternoon, I volunteered in the women's ward of another house called Prem Dan, a hospice for convalescent patients. These patients have been living at Prem Dan anywhere from a few months to fifteen years. About half of them were bed ridden or needed walkers and some were amputees. It seemed nearly impossible to communicate; only a handful of them spoke English. I remember one elderly woman speaking to me with a hushed voice in Bengali. I nodded my head several times and tried to conduct my facial expressions to her tone of voice. It seemed to matter little to her that I didn't understand a word of what she was saying, only that she had someone willing to listen. When the women discovered that I loved Indian dance, they would turn the radio on and insist, "Nach, nach!" which meant, "dance, dance!" And when I grew tired of dancing and out of breath, one of them would sit me under a fan, and mop my sweat away with her shawl. And that made every drop of sweat worthwhile.



Every morning, Katie and I dragged ourselves out of bed at 5am in order to attend the 6am mass at the motherhouse, or the headquarters of the Missionaries of Charity. Mass was followed by a simple breakfast of bread, baby banana, and chai and a farewell song for volunteers who were leaving that day. At one point there was over a hundred volunteers crowding the breakfast room; people from so many different walks of life came together for a common cause. Inspired by the life of Mother Teresa and the sisters who tried to live like the poor and denied themselves the comfort of even a fan in the ridiculous heat and humidity, my work there became more meaningful and even spiritual. I grew through my friendships with other volunteers as well, many of whom who had decided to just pick up and give their time in Kolkata. Just like that. For the first time in my life, I began to deeply question my faith, and ironically, I felt that this brought me closer to God. It was comforting to know that so many people of all ages and backgrounds, struggled in their faith too, even while trying to do God's work.



I could not change what I saw every day on the streets, and in the end, the people of Kolkata had given more to me than I could possibly hope to give to them. They taught me a sense of humbleness and gratitude that shook me to the core. I was both a small spec of dust in this world, and yet I learned that I required very little to be the happiest and largest person on earth. And I found that every tiny act makes a small difference. There *was* in fact, a change in those people's lives, even if it wasn't readily visible. As Mother Teresa once said, "We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop." It's my hope that through service, I could continue adding to that ocean.