

## Kolkata: The City of Joy

Summer of Service 2012

By Rani Berry

The seatbelt sign still blinks in the darkness of the plane when I am disrupted by the sounds of aunties, uncles and children rising to get their luggage as though the flight is having a competition for the first one off the plane---Welcome to Kolkata . At first I am irritated, why can't they just wait or let me pass by and join my friends before a lieu of people come running between us! In the hot, humid and loud airport my first impression of Kolkata is foreign.



*Just a normal day in Kolkata, tractors on the road and all!*

The ride from the airport to our residence makes me think about a new possible ride at Disneyland as we duck and dodge cars & bicycles, potholes & puppies. The driver is unphased by the sirens of the ambulance behind him & even

curses as the larger car manages to overtake us. We finally splurge on our 2\$ feast of rice, curry, sandwiches and chai, and fall into a deep jetlagged sleep.

On the walk to the Mother House, I saw Dan's face light up before I saw the open field myself, but we are both immediately excited, sports! To our left is an open dirt patch with 7-10 boys playing cricket! In less than 5 minutes the boys were sharing their bats and bowling balls with us while we tried to defend our 3 wickets. Now that I look back I wonder how the game would have gone if we had switched places. Would I have let three strangers bat over and over again while I patiently waited in line? Would I have even wanted older, foreign and confused people to play...probably not.



*Before we began our service in Kolkata, the people of the City of Joy served us first.*

On my first day I learned that I cannot assume that these people need me, I need them. I need them to teach me, humble me & show me their ways. I may attempt to help heal their wounds but I now recognize that the people of India nourished my

soul and reminded me that service is always selfish, because it serviced a part of me first.

Our mornings began at 6:30am when Tina, Dan and I would drowsily work around each other in our one room living space, to shower, brush our teeth, load up on sun screen and mosquito repellent and jog to the nearby convenient store to grab our 15 rupee (\$0.20) water bottles. The Mother House was quietly located in-between our lodgings and the convenient store where we would receive our humble breakfast of



bananas, bread and chai. Following breakfast volunteers and Sisters alike would stand in prayer, sing a farewell song to those volunteers whose last day it was and then we would all separate onto different public buses to the various service sites.

*Walkway to the Mother House (above) and all the volunteers ready for breakfast and prayer! (below)*

Initially Tina and I started our mornings at Prem Dan, a woman's service center, located in the heart of the slums, which we reached by walking through people's "homes" made of newspapers, trash bags and banded wood. What surprised me most was the character in each these abodes, decorated with small temples, vibrant colors, and the sounds of jingling anklets as babies ran in and out of neighboring shelters.

The children were cute, and aware of it. Forced by their harsh upbringings and familiarity with volunteers they often attempted pick pocketing or **cunningly** appealing **to our conscience** as we walked to the boarded off Prem Dan site.

My first time at Prem Dan left me feeling guilty and helpless; our care for women my mother's age was emotionally new for me and at first I found it difficult to help feed, clothe and change women whom had been left with such debilitating conditions all alone. This all changed when I realized that the virtues of integrity, compassion, respect, honesty, and love surpass age, culture and language barriers. I learned to break through language barriers through a bottle of nail polish and the universal



ability to dance to a beat. I was trying too hard to care for these women in the “right” way that it took me time to see that they loved me and were trying to make me feel at home and happy the whole time.



*In the first two days in Kolkata I had personally experienced Mother Teresa's words, "for it is in giving that we receive" and throughout my time in India I replayed these words in my heart.*

After Prem Dan Tina and I met up with Dan who worked at Kalighat, a nearby service site known in English as “the house of the dying”, and the three of us ventured through the city bargaining prices for lunch before our second service site, which would soon become our second home, Daya Dan.

Daya Dan is a three-story building located down a small dirt alleyway, and the entrance is so small that if you aren’t paying attention you may just over look it—which our tuk-tuk drivers often did! Once we arrived we would rush over to our boys and fill the afternoon hours playing music, blowing bubbles, drinking chai or run around the terrace with our babies.



*I'll always look back at this sign and think of all the different emotions I felt as I walked through this gate: fatigued, excited, anxious, sad, yet fulfilled in an unusual way.*



*The boys of Daya Dan on our last day ☺*



*Emanuel, Joaquim and John in their uniforms ready for class!*

Soon it became clear that by splitting our time between Prem Dan and Daya Dan there was simply not enough time to get to know either the children or the women we worked with. So we after much deliberation we decided to focus on the boys we were so attached to, and for the following 8 weeks we stayed at Daya Dan both in the morning and afternoon aside from our one day off and our Monday's at the dispensary.



*All ready for our day at the dispensary!*





*Dan working on a patient at the dispensary.*

When I think of Kolkata I can't find a simple way to tell my stories or the stories of the people I've met. It would take too many pages to share all the special moments I had with the boys of Daya Dan, the patients at the dispensary, the women of Prem Dan, the many locals or even all my fellow volunteers who touched my heart. I'll try my best to show the city of joy through pictures.



*Holy Cow!*



Our local “chai-walla” (one who sells tea)!



Nate and Noel getting some frosting action, after one of the boy's birthdays! ☺

At the start of my journey in Kolkata I focused so greatly on the people I met there that it wasn't until the second or third week when I realized that being in India has not only given me an opportunity to understand the locals but also to learn about our peers back at home. I've learned that by leaving the country you develop a unique bond with all the volunteers who have come from around the world to support the same cause. Upon leaving Siena and my small biology bubble I learned from theologians, artists and learned so much more about the world.

I will never forget my time in Kolkata, the incessant honking and bumpy car rides combined with Rama's smile, Bernard's laugh that together make up the vibrancy of the city. I think I'll always crave the egg rolls and lassi's that we would eat in between our service, and I will forever appreciate, what prior to India, were seemingly small things in life: air conditioning, a granola bar, clean air, clean shoes, electricity, water, law and order and a house to come home to. India showed me poverty unparalleled to that I've seen in other countries and back at home, but it also showed me that happiness is not directly proportional to the amount of money we have, it's a manifestation of our interactions with others and ultimately comes from our service to our fellow brothers and sisters.

To touch and be touched are equally valuable. I am blessed, what other explanation is there.