

Welcome to the City of Joy
Kolkata, India

Summer of Service 2010
Kate Ruzzo

“In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.”
Mother Teresa



For my Summer of Service I worked with the Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata, India. Volunteering with the Missionaries of Charity sisters, the order founded by Mother Teresa in the 1950s, was an experience that will resonate with me forever. For six weeks my classmate Ashley Paul and I served out Mother’s call to serve the poorest of the poor in this torrid city.



At the beginning of our journey it seemed quite comical that Kolkata could be dubbed the City of Joy as we walked through filth and despair, but by the end of the trip I could not think of a better nickname for this place that remains hopeful despite the horrible living conditions of many of its inhabitants. The first day we entered the Mother House to receive information in about different service sites, I was anxious that I would mess up or not know what to do. Yet, all my fears were resolved once I began chatting with other volunteers during breakfast at the Mother House. They came for all over the world and all walks of life to catch a glimpse of this wonderful project Mother Teresa started on her own some sixty years ago.



Ashley and I at the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata



Me at Daya Dan with Ankur, Manu, and Joakim

In Calcutta my classmate Ashley Paul and I worked at Daya Dan, an orphanage for mentally and physically disabled children. We worked with the boys who lived on the first floor, several of whom receive personal tutoring from English-speaking volunteers and others who focus on physical therapy. Our daily routine consisted of making beds and doing laundry before we personally tutored a specific boy in elementary English, mathematics, and communication skills. At first it was difficult to interact with the boys due to their handicaps; each boy has unique needs and must be handled accordingly. After about a week I began to pick up on the nuances of some of the boys. Some are extremely outgoing, while others are timid and do not participate with the others.



A very smiley Joakim

We decided to commit to Daya Dan and engage in the volunteer-tutoring for the boys. On my first day, I was introduced to a young boy named Joakim. His teacher was leaving later that week so I became her replacement. For the duration of my stay, I worked with him on his communication skills, letter identification, and numbers. Many of the boys, including Joakim, have severe learning disabilities which was a major obstacle inside and outside the classroom. At times it seemed that nothing I could do would break through. I was told that he loved music, so whenever the lesson hit a roadblock he would get out of his chair and perform “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” before returning his desk. I learned enumerable lessons about the true value in life, and what really makes one happy.



Ankur and Binoy in Siena gear

At times it was easy to overlook the unfortunate circumstances of the boys, many of whom had been abandoned by their families, because they were always joyful. The woman in charge, Sister Jonafa, is a wonderfully giving lady. She looks after each of the boys as if he were her own child.



Everyone is gathered for sports day



Outside the Men's ward at Prem Dan

Our afternoons were spent at a much different location: a hospice called Prem Dan. We usually washed dishes, fed patients, and spoke with the women. Many of whom were long-term residents at the facility. Most did not speak English, but the emotion undoubtedly transcended language barriers. Several of the women would attempt to communicate through a mixture of Basic English, Hindi, Bengali, and hand motions. One of the ladies told Ashley and I to go find an Indian boy, fall in love, and get married. Spirits were high despite the lack of family contact many of the women experience. Most days the archaic radio was turned on and the dancing began. Every woman had her own story and circumstances for being at the facility. They also enjoyed getting their nails painted and having someone to smile as they gabbed on in some remote language.



Me and Reemah

In short, the six weeks of my summer that I spent in Kolkata will always be in my heart. We witnessed poverty unlike anything I had seen before at home or abroad. Experiences of visiting a leper clinic and feeding a woman whose face had been badly burned by acid that he husband threw at her will remain with me as I continue on my journey to becoming a physician. I will never forget Joakim and the millions of children throughout the world who have no other teacher than a small group of weary volunteers. Yet most of all I can now say that I witnessed firsthand what Mother meant by, “In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.” I may not be able to eradicate learning disabilities and disease, but I was able to comfort my fellow human beings in their time of need.



A photo of Mother Teresa that hangs at her tomb