



Letter from the President

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President's Letter

We've started! We've had the groundbreaking for the Peery Secondary School for Rising Stars. An interesting cultural vignette from India is the importance of starting projects on an "auspicious day." These days are determined by the stars. Here in the States we take much more of a business approach to such things, but have learned to accommodate both cultures to the best of our ability. One of our young school children who had gathered to watch the foundations beginning to be dug for the new school, suddenly exclaimed to Dr. Gibb, as he pointed to the dedication date on our elementary school, "Look, uncle, today is exactly one year to the day we dedicated our elementary school!" Now that's auspicious!

I had occasion to write a description of our school at Rising Star, for the President of another charity. It occurred to me that some of our newer donors likely do not understand the concept and purpose behind our school, so have decided to include some excerpts from that letter, in our newsletter this month:

"80% of our school community is from the leprosy colonies. We opted to have a boarding school for several reasons. One is that the children in the colonies are frequently used by their parents as beggars. People tend to give

more to children who beg, than to adults. By keeping the children at the Rising Star



School, they are no longer available for begging. We have a very strict policy that the parents can-

not take the child out of the school for even a day. In the past, we were aware that the parents would take their children out of boarding schools when they needed them to beg, or during a holiday when beggars tend to make more money. We felt that this was destroying everything we were trying to accomplish. Instead, we enacted a monthly Parents' Day. The parents come once a month and spend the entire day with their children. It gives us a chance to do some educational classes on parenting skills, proper hygiene habits, etc. with the parents. In order to have a child in our school, the parents have to be engaged in micro-business of some sort. So the parent's day also ends up being a good time to check in with the micro-businesses. The children also spend holidays and summer vacation with their parents.

Another reason the parents send the children begging is that the children have nothing to do—they just languish in the colonies. Most of them resist going to the public schools because they are treated with such disdain by both the teachers and their peers, that they drop out. Also, the children don't typically have parents who read or write. The parents are normally beggars themselves. So there's been no patterning of importance of education.

The children at our school can be picked out of any colony. We tell some anecdotal stories about this. In one case, we had a volunteer who, due to the schedule, was unable to get out to the leprosy colonies during his stay. When he left he commented that he had been somewhat



led in coming to India to work with these kids. He had thought they were needy children! We about died! Our children look so healthy and are so happy, that this volunteer actually thought they weren't needy kids! We made a silent determination to make sure that from that time forward every volunteer would spend at least one day in a leprosy colony. We haven't had the same complaint again!

Another fun story is of a group of volunteers that was working in a colony helping them to build a fence around their rice paddy. The children love to come watch and interact with the volunteers as their parents work together with the volunteers in a project. One volunteer looking at the ragged children, pointed to one and said, "Wow, that child looks healthy enough to be a Rising Star child!" even though the child was dressed in rags like the rest of the kids. It turned out that, in fact, the child was a Rising Star student. She was home because her mother had just died—she had come home for the funeral.

The children at the school are not only educated there. They are taught principles of proper hygiene, spiritual education, and socialization skills. Many of our children are not even toilet trained when they arrive. They have to be taught the most basic skills. Begging in the streets, they have not had normal opportunities to play with other children. They are typically very violent when they arrive. They come with ringworm, scabies, lice, parasites, TB, and a host of other diseases. Most have never seen either a doctor or a dentist. They have certainly never brushed their teeth. So their education involves many "Life" skills, as well as regular education.

We mix the children from the leprosy colonies with children from the surrounding villages. 20% of

our school population comes from the surrounding villages. Initially people laughed as we were building the school, when we told them that we would open up a few slots for village children. Everyone said that villagers would never send their children to school with the children of the leprosy-affected. But once the villages learned that we are offering free English instruction (taught by Americans, no less) and have a state-of-the-art computer lab, the villagers began begging us to take their children. We now have a waiting list from the villages of hundreds of children. Villages as far as an hour away are begging us to take their top students. We have had no trouble at all at the school with integrating the two populations. It is truly helping the children of the leprosy-affected overcome the stigma that has dogged their parents' footsteps their entire lives.

Due to the tremendous stigma against children from leprosy colonies, we feel that their education has to be far superior to the education of "regular" children, if they are to be competitive in the work place. Since multi-national companies tend not to discriminate based on social status, we have partnered with a number of multi-national companies who have agreed to hire our children when they graduate, provided that they are qualified. That usually means that they have to have excellent English speaking skills, as well as computer proficiency, and math skills.

We have based our educational program on the belief that if a population of children of the leprosy-affected can achieve excellent academic and financial success, then it will affect the way children from the colonies are viewed, all over India. A similar case is that of the American blacks. Less than 30 years ago, blacks were viewed by many in America as being poor and uneducated. Then as a few obtained opportunities for education and success, the view gradually began to change. Today, white Americans view black Americans equally. We even have a black president now!

We believe this same thing can happen in India. As the children at our school become successful and productive citizens of India, it can begin to affect how the rest of India views the children of the leprosy colonies. We expect our children to be in some of the top and most prestigious jobs available.

As these children are educated, we have already begun to see changes in the family's hygiene and parenting habits. They are also becoming economically self-reliant as they participate in the micro-businesses. We believe the children's success will dramatically raise their family's economic well-being even more, as the children become successful (since we work so hard to keep both the parents and the children bonded closely).

We are great proponents of micro-enterprise. But in all honesty, as successful as the small micro-businesses are at getting beggars off the streets and

into productive activity, still at the end of the day, even the successful business owners are still basically poor. There generally seems to be a limit as to how financially successful they can become without education. But this will change as the children become an integral part of the international business community. The families' economic status will change dramatically. As the children become successful and productive citizens of India, instead of the next generation of beggars on the street, entire leprosy colonies will be benefited."

Child Spotlight: Elina Benjamin F. 10.12.02

What words can be found to do this little girl justice? To say she's always happy or always smiling, are huge understatements. She



beams with enthusiasm for life. One volunteer noted "I saw her carrying laundry to the clothesline other day wearing the biggest grin on her face... Looking at her, you'd have thought she was at Disneyland."

Elina just loves life. Elina is from the Villivakam leprosy colony. Her parents are separated and she lives with her father. Elina Benjamin is patient in her suffering. She once had a really bad staff infection, and instead of wincing, whining, and crying (all of which would have been acceptable for a 7 year old) she remained stoic; dealing with her pain internally. She is such a sweet girl, very good to other girls,

very kind, very helpful to smaller children. She also helps do more than her share of the cleaning. Elina Benjamin's personality is enormous.

Postcard from the Field: (By Ron and Joyce Hanson)

Thottanaval Village is beautiful and quaint. It is a charming, but remote place, so it is difficult for visitors to find us.

Even so, every week people come by. Some are from the U.S. and arrive to help with our work; they may stay for weeks or months. Others come for a tour and stay for a few hours. This last month, for example, several contractors came to inspect the construction site. LDS Humanitarian missionaries shared a lunch. Dr. Balu, a US Board member, brought representatives from one of the best schools in Chennai. A week later, 15 students from that school's Social Service Club visited and entertained the students. Our bankers made a company call.

The children have two special days of visitors each month. On a Saturday the Marriott Associates from the Chennai Courtyard Marriott Hotel bring games and food, and importantly stand as great role models for our children. The other exciting day is when families come to be with their children.

While Rising Star Outreach is a resident school, an important part of the mission is for our children to maintain their family ties and heritage. On Parent's Day families start arriving about 10:00a.m the first Saturday of the month. For some parents it may be more than a one-day bus or rail trip. They travel to Nalvoy Junction, seven kilometers away, where we send our vehicles to ferry them to the campus. It is a great sacrifice for many to miss one or two days of work, but they come because these children are their future hope and their greatest blessing.

The families gather in small groups on the ground in the mango grove. Mothers comb out the long black hair of their daughters and tie in the fragrant flowers they have brought.



Zoological Gardens in Chennai enjoying the birds, fish, and animals. After a great picnic lunch provided by the Rising Star cooks all returned tired but happy. The next week the upper-grade students spent a long day traveling to Gingee Fort and Sathanur Dam in neighboring Thirunamalai district. The 13th-century Gingee Fort covers seven square kilometers encompassing three high granite hills and requires a taxing climb of 2,000

Lunch comes in plastic bags, as well as special treats to be left for later. Those treats are carefully protected. Some end up in our refrigerator and little by little over the next several days, the treats are gone. There are always tears, usually from the youngest children, when it is time to say goodbye. The sadness is gone, however, by playtime at 4:00p.m.

It is not a happy Saturday for all children. Some never get a visit- the distance for the parent to travel is too great or there is no parent. Others hope for an arrival and expectantly stand by the check-in area all morning. It hurts our hearts when no one comes. For these children, we show movies and prepare a separate lunch so it will be a special day for them too.

Visitors are an integral part of Rising Star. We recognize the great support we get from these people and we love to show off our children and our beautiful campus. Come see us, but call or write first to make sure we can have a meal or bed ready.

To follow the Hanson's adventures in India, log on to their blog at:

<http://india-walkinginthesand.blogspot.com>

School Director Report: (By Gordon Gibb, School Director)

This is the popular time of year for Indian teachers and students to venture on annual excursions. Peery Matriculation School students went in two groups this year. The lower-grade kids spent the day at the Anna

steps to the citadel at the top. The history of this renowned fortress is a fascinating part of Indian culture. Sathanur Dam is one of three hydroelectric facilities in Tamil Nadu. The students learned firsthand about this method of generating much needed electricity using the natural physics of water-powered turbines. Both excursions were enjoyable and educational, and the students and teachers greatly appreciated the priceless opportunity to learn about Indian history and modern technology.

To follow Dr. Gibb's adventures in India, you can log on to his blog at: www.teachindia.blogspot.com

Volunteer Corner: (By Matt Zabawa and Sara Hughes)

If asked Matthew and Sara feel extremely blessed to be surrounded by the wonderful children and staff at Rising Star Outreach. Matthew just received his Masters in Mechanical Engineering and will begin his MBA in the fall. Sara is conducting the last portion of her academic internship and will receive her bachelor's degree in Social Work and Women's Studies; she too will be attending graduate school in the fall.

Matthew has become the children's after school athletic director and organizes soccer games every weekday evening, making him the soccer coach and referee simultaneously. Matthew engineered a brand new basketball hoop just in time for Shawn Bradley's arrival.

Matthew regularly assists Dr. Kirby in the leprosy colonies by taking photos of the patient's wounds so that Rising Star Outreach can document and visually track the patients' progress. This allows the leprosy patients to see the before and after pictures which reinforces the success of proper wound care. Matthew has also tried his hand at farming. He was asked to begin a micro credit program for the children; the older children assist with the farming on the property and ultimately they will sell their crop back to Rising Star Outreach and that money will be placed in a college fund. The children have worked hard on their assigned chicken coop, watermelon patches, chili fields, and tomatoes. Matthew also assists the moral science course taught at the school and pitches in wherever he is needed. He also hopes to begin working closely with the micro credit programs within the colonies.

Sara has been asked to form and conduct a moral science curriculum and teaches at the school three days a week. So far, the curriculum has included the concept of choice and accountability and the steps toward successful goal setting. Sara also runs two Family Home Evening groups every weekday night so that all 122 kids can attend FHE once a week in small groups. She will begin a parenting class where the housemothers can become more educated on positive reinforcement and different approaches to child rearing and discipline. Sara has also begun a "girls group" for the older girls and discusses essential topics such as the importance of an education, female role models, safeguarding one's self from physical and sexual abuse, and self worth. The girls group will include guest speakers and various field trips to women's colleges, the Marriot Hotel etc.

In addition, Sara is piloting the first administration of the "Stay Alive Program" in India. "Stay Alive" is an HIV/AIDS prevention education for children and empowerment program. She is also investigating culturally sensitive approaches to teaching the children a "good touch, bad touch" curriculum so the children can be adequately equipped with the knowledge and skills to protect themselves from physical and sexual abuse.