

We took the path less travelled, and that has made all the difference.

For most of us, it was our first visit to India. Thus, there was an air of apprehension and uncertainty as the 17 of us embarked on this journey, where we would be living in a foreign environment for two weeks. Even with online research, we knew little about the local culture and customs. On top of that, our biggest worry was the language barrier between the children and us as we were unfamiliar with the language they used. Despite the challenges that lay ahead, we still embraced the trip with open minds and hearts, ready to share and to learn.

Over the course of two weeks, our team was based in Cornerstone Orphanage under Deva Kirubai Social Help Association (DKSHA). We conducted various activities not only in the orphanage, but also in the nearby local school as well as village. Our host, who was also the founder of DKSHA, was Mr Isaac. Although he appeared to be an authoritative father figure to the children, he was actually kind and had a heart of gold. An orphan himself, he aspired to reach out to the destitute and help them to the best of his abilities. Our team was deeply inspired by Mr Isaac's story and we were truly thankful for the opportunity to work with him.

Our project was broadly divided into three components, namely infrastructure, education and activities in Cornerstone Orphanage. In the first week, we focused on infrastructure and built three mushroom sheds in the Kalkothanur village. With the help of Dr Karuppuraj, an expert in mushroom cultivation, we imparted the necessary knowledge and skills to the villagers who would make use of the new units to cultivate and sell mushrooms as an additional source of income to improve their families' standard of living. Our team was very motivated to build the mushroom sheds as we wanted to contribute something that would have continuity even after we left, and we understood the significance of the mushroom sheds in fulfilling this purpose.

In the second week, we focused on education and conducted a four-day teaching programme for students in Grades 6, 7, 8 and 9 in the St Antony's School, where many DKSHA children study. In line with the school's objective to introduce activity-based learning to the students, we structured our lessons with an emphasis on learning through play and interactive learning. The students were very eager to learn and they participated enthusiastically in our activities. During our stay, we were also humbled to receive an invitation to the St. Antony's College of Arts and Sciences for Women for an interactive dialogue session with the students, where we shared about the Singapore culture. This opportunity proved to be a pleasant and insightful exposure for all our team members.

During our stay, the team interacted with the children during evening playtime and study hours. Over the two weekends, we also conducted two major activities for the children in Cornerstone Orphanage, namely Amazing Race and Campfire.

The children in DKSHA had been nothing but angels during our stay. They had taught me so many important life lessons and I would like to share my insights here:

1. Be contented with what you have and appreciate the little joys in life

Cornerstone orphanage is a humble abode, which provides shelter, food and education for needy children between five and 18 years old. Although the living conditions are not luxurious, the children are contented with having a roof over their heads and food on their plates. Having lived away from their families since they were young, this experience has molded these children to become independent and matured characters who face adversity with tenacity.

2. Never be afraid to dream big, for the sky is the limit

The children are innocent and hopeful of the future. They have aspirations to break through poverty and attain success. This reminds us never to be afraid to dream big, for the sky is the limit.

3. Happiness is a choice

In DKSHA, chuckles and laughter rang in the air during playtime, as the children gathered to play football, ring ball, catching or skipping. These children were full of love and warmth. They were very welcoming and enthusiastic in receiving all of us. Over the course of two weeks, our team also forged friendships with the children through interaction and games. It turned out that the language barrier did not stop us from becoming good friends with the children as communication and understanding took place in other forms, such as through gestures and translation. We realized that as long as our hearts were willing to give and share, the children were always ready to receive and give in return as well.

This trip has truly been meaningful and inspiring to all of us in the team. We are sincerely appreciative to everyone who has helped us along the way, including our hosts Mr. Isaac and Isabella for their warm hospitality, Dr. Elango, Arul, Thomas, Mowshimkka, Santhosh as well as Ms Wendy for their encouragement and support.

Written by Chandel Lim

General Information

Trip Duration: 8 June 2013 to 23 June 2013

Team strength: 17

Team information: We are a group of students from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. During the school term, we live on campus in Hall of Residence 9. Although Hall 9 has been organizing annual overseas voluntary projects to Indonesia for the past five years, this is the pioneer batch of students from Hall of Residence 9 to be embarking on a trip to India for social work.