

NEWS

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for friends of

asha

Asha is a community health and development society dedicated to improving the lives of slum dwellers in Delhi

Sunil – an inspirational high school student

'I always remember that I am unique. Just like everyone else. I never give up.' Who would imagine that a young disabled boy living in a slum spoke these words? Well, these are Sunil's words, the slum is Ekta Vihar, and the huge smile that lights up Sunil's face confirms that he means every word he says.

With a population of nearly 1.2 billion, out of which about 227 million are attending school, getting admitted to college in India is a challenge for even an above average student. Without proper guidance, most children get lost in the crowd. For a child living in a slum with nowhere quiet to study, insufficient food, frequent power cuts, no encouragement from his family or teachers and no money to buy books, a college education is like a distant dream. Can you imagine how difficult it would be for a boy suffering from polio in both legs, living in these conditions? Something as simple as going to the nearest public toilet would mean crawling through dirty slum roads- a half hour trek!

Maintaining his individuality in a slum where about 4,000 people live in an area of less than 120 square metres, Sunil is determined to prove himself. His jovial demeanour coupled with his unrelenting desire to succeed in all he undertakes brings a new message of optimism to anyone he meets. When with him one cannot help but think about the things we take for granted. Even the day Sunil's wheelchair was stolen, he laughed about getting up at 4 in the morning to reach school on time. "It's OK though" he smiled, "crawling to school will be good exercise for me." Upon meeting Sunil one cannot ignore the fact that there are real people living in slums with real problems - problems that make our own seem so insignificant.

Most children in slums do not even know how it feels to be encouraged. If for a minute we put ourselves in the place of these children and think where we would be if our family thought that going to school was a waste of time; if we were made to pick rags instead because our parents desperately needed the little money we would earn to buy food, we would see where we would be: nowhere.

These children are special. They need our encouragement and our time and our prayers and our love. To look the other way and pretend they don't exist is to do injustice to the opportunities we have been so fortunate to receive.

All of us at Asha are determined to give each child from our slums the ability to think, to reason, to achieve, to grow and to live life to the fullest. And we think that education is the key that will unlock the doors to a better life for these children. We are hopeful that Sunil, along with other children from our slums, will be admitted to a good college. We knew that if we provided Sunil with encouragement, counselling and the books and guides which his family could not afford, he would excel in his studies. Sunil proved us right!

Recently Sunil got the 'best student' award from the Education Director of Delhi, Mr. Chandra Bhushan Kumar. On the occasion Sunil recited a poem about the importance of education for handicapped children before rushing to the Asha office with his award and certificate. In tears he said, "In the recent pre-board exam, I excelled. It was because I read the sample papers provided by Asha. I am planning to score above 80% in the board exam. I am studying for more than 12 hours a day now. Asha has also provided me with books and registers - I'm eager to fill them up with my poems and homework. Asha has been my strength throughout my life, and I want to thank Asha for all the help provided to me".

Sunil is only one of the children attending high school that Asha is supporting with books, study guides, stationery, teachers and a computer to practise on so that they can do well in school and attend college. We are supporting 622 high school students.

With the Board exams (the most important school exams in India) beginning this month we are just as nervous as our slum children. The marks obtained in these exams will help determine how many of these children will be selected for college.

The 'History Makers', the first 30 children from our slums ever to attend college with Asha's help, have realised the importance of a college education, and they have started mentoring Sunil and others who are about to finish school so that they can also do well in their exams and attend college.

Sunil's mentor, Rajpal, who attends Ram Lal Anand College at the University of Delhi, voiced the opinion of the students attending college stating, "we were the first 30, this year there will be at least 300, and later every child from the slums will attend college. This is just the beginning. We are on the brink of an educational revolution!".



Sunil receiving books from Paul, a member of the Asha staff

WATCH SUNIL'S INTERVIEW AND OTHER ASHA VIDEOS ON YOUTUBE!

visit www.youtube.com and search for "Asha Society" to see Asha's work past and present.

Visit the Asha website at: www.asha-india.org

Kiran's letter

Dear Friends,

In the twenty years I have spent with the poor in the slums, I have come to realise that how they perceive me has absolutely nothing to do with any of my accomplishments. Having never been to university themselves, my medical degrees don't impress them. My reputation as an international speaker has no relevance to them, the articles I write are even less valuable.

The only thing that matters to them is the love I give them. They are broken, wounded, unpretentious, and they force me to let go of my relevant self - the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things. They force me to face my unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love, regardless of any accomplishments.

When I look at them, the question in their eyes is - Do you love me? Do you really care? Can you hold me and give me a sense of belonging? Can you protect me and make me feel safe?

We can come to believe that growing older and more mature means that we will increasingly be able to offer leadership. We grow more self confident over the years, more and more in control. Gradually, the temptation of power seems irresistible. The poor are not looking for someone who carries a message of power, of efficiency, of control. They are looking for someone who carries a message of love. A heart that understands the magnitude of their pain. A heart that offers consolation and hope. A heart that offers love without any conditions or limits when fear, isolation or despair begin to invade their souls. Someone who can fill their gaping wounds that carry such names as abandonment, betrayal, rejection, rupture and loss. Someone who can bring light into the darkness that never seems to leave their hearts.

When I see them everyday with that knowledge, I cannot do anything other than be God's messenger of healing, reconciliation and hope wherever I go. The desire to be powerful and successful gradually disappears, and power is constantly abandoned in favour of love. The only desire left is to say to my dear brothers and sisters in the slums, "You are loved. There is no reason to be afraid."

Dr Kiran Martin
Director & Founder



Dr Kiran with high school students at Kanak Durga slum

News in Brief

Visitors, Teams and Volunteers

While the team from St. Stephen's Church in Twickenham, UK, spent their time renovating the Asha centre at Mayapuri and holding 'Alcoholics Anonymous' sessions at 4 other Asha centres, the team from Methodist College in Belfast, Northern Ireland, painted beautiful murals in the Asha centre at Kalkaji and conducted workshops to motivate the children attending college from the Kalkaji area. We are grateful to Mr Scott Naismith, the Principal of Methodist College, for his keen interest in our partnership.



Volunteers visit Wendy Butler at the British High Commission

The Metcalf Foundation from Canada organised a 10-member team to visit Asha under the theme - Social Change at Work in India: A Leadership Journey for Canadians. Tearfund Netherlands hired a TV crew to make a movie depicting the work of Asha. Alison Craig, from the Presbyterian Church in UK, led a team of young volunteers to see Asha's work in detail. Members from Canassist visited Asha and witnessed the Vitamin A drive taken up at Vivekanand slum. Katharina Mathias from Germany has been teaching English at Ekta Vihar and DAB for the past two months. Jonathan and Diana from St. Timothy's Church in UK spent 10 days volunteering at our centre at Anna Nagar.

College Students Visit the Irish Embassy

The 'History Makers' - the first 30 children from our slums to ever attend college - and Dr. Martin were invited to the Irish Embassy by Mr. Pat Bourne, Deputy Ambassador of Ireland to India.

These students have proved themselves to be determined young men and women, capable of facing whatever challenges come their way, and Mr. Bourne was very happy to hear about their experiences. The excited students told Mr. Bourne that they have made friends with students from other backgrounds and all of a sudden a whole new world has opened up to them! The experience of getting to be a part of Delhi University and have distinguished professors teach them has opened up their minds. They are more confident and are able to express themselves better now. The students asked Mr. Bourne many questions and ideas were exchanged freely. Some students were curious about the college students in Ireland and Mr. Bourne was happy to tell them about the system of education in Ireland and hear them speak about their college experiences.

The association between the Irish Embassy and Asha has lasted for over 4 years and Mr. Bourne said that this association would continue as he was greatly inspired by the work of Asha.

School Students take Exams

In March the students from Asha slums currently taking their board exams (GCSE and A-levels) came to Asha to meet Dr. Martin and the Asha staff who have provided them with encouragement and support throughout the year. Although they are apprehensive, they know they have worked hard and are looking forward to seeing the results of their efforts. Their exams go on until mid April. We request you to keep these 622 students in your thoughts as they appear for their exams.

Success of loan scheme exceeds all expectations

Many people in slums have suffered as a result of people's unfair impressions and prejudices. So often, they are made to feel worthless, invisible members of society. Now, loan recipients from Ekta Vihar have proved that they are not only as good as, but far better than many middle-class bank customers.

Community members received loans for a wide range of reasons, and all but 1% have worked hard and managed to repay the money at the agreed rate and timescales. Compare this to the average default rate of 6-7%! The residents have proved themselves to Asha, to Mr Chidambaram, India's former Finance Minister, and everyone else who felt that they deserved a chance to join the mainstream and have the same opportunities as everyone else. All the banks involved in the scheme no longer consider lending to slum dwellers a risk.

Thanks to the efforts of the Ekta Vihar loan recipients, thousands more people will gain access to loans that will allow them to improve their businesses, give their children a better education, gain a higher standard of living, and so many other things that most of us take for granted.



Hopeful slum residents get help with loan applications

Dr. Kiran Martin lectures at Harvard University

On Feb 9th '09, Dr. Kiran Martin visited Harvard University and gave a lecture concerning urban poverty and education in the slums. She vividly described the problems and challenges facing children in India's government schools, and the positive ways in which Asha is addressing these issues.

Dr Martin has spoken at Harvard on many occasions, and this visit was particularly relevant in light of Asha's recently increased focus on education. The talk was attended by students pursuing a variety of courses, and was very well received. Many Harvard students are already ardent supporters of Asha, and some have visited and seen the work for themselves. A record number of students from Harvard will be doing their summer internship at Asha this year.



Dr Kiran Martin, founder and leader of the NGO Asha, discusses the challenges of educating children in poor, developing countries yesterday

Andrew Rowe

In this edition of the newsletter we are very sad to report that our longtime friend and supporter, Mr Andrew Rowe, left for his heavenly abode on 21 November after a long illness.

Andrew first came to know of Asha when he visited with a delegation from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, UK. He was greatly impressed and inspired by the positive changes that he witnessed on visiting Asha project areas, and it was the beginning of a partnership that lasted for many years. Andrew returned to Asha several times, took up the post of Chairman of Friends of Asha (GB) and was a hugely loyal and influential supporter of our work.

Although Andrew was a respected politician and held a number of important positions whilst a Member of Parliament, his privileged background and education did not prevent him from showing great compassion towards those less fortunate, both at home, in India, and elsewhere.

He remained cheerful, optimistic and showed characteristic humour even when seriously ill, and despite his condition he displayed real enthusiasm and interest in Asha's work and the slum communities.

We feel very fortunate to have known Andrew and we are immensely grateful for his support. We will always remember him fondly, and he will be greatly missed.

Family planning clinics for all areas

With so many exciting new developments in our work, it is important to give sufficient attention to the areas that Asha has tackled from the beginning - those of health and empowerment.

For the past two months, we have placed particular emphasis on family planning. Few things can make as much difference to the quality of life of families living in slums than the number of children in the household. As well as the obvious financial benefits of having fewer family members to feed, clothe and support, mothers face reduced health risks when they have fewer pregnancies that are reasonably spaced, and parents can give more attention to the resulting children, who are invariably healthier.

Asha staff members have been running family planning clinics in all slum areas, with hundreds of people attending. Couples were given unbiased advice on the various contraceptive options available to them, and oral contraceptive pills and condoms distributed to people opting for those methods. Women who were interested in contraceptive injections or inter-uterine devices were referred to the Asha Polyclinic, and some people with their desired number of children opted to undergo either vasectomies or tubectomies in hospital. These procedures are performed free of charge under a Government scheme. Similar women-only sessions were run to make it easier for women to voice any questions or fears that they may have had.

Already, over two hundred people have taken the decision to plan their families by using various contraceptive methods. Asha has even improved understanding between many wives and their mothers-in-law after explaining the benefits of contraceptive use to women of the older generation. It is heartening to see new awareness and so many people taking responsibility for their family size. This, and the fact that men are beginning to volunteer for vasectomies, show how much local beliefs and customs can change for the better when information and support is made easily available.



A family planning clinic in progress

Friends of Asha

If you want to contribute to the lives of poor slum dwellers in Delhi, then we suggest that you become a Friend of Asha. As a Friend of Asha we welcome you to join the Asha family that exists to help the downtrodden and oppressed live a life of dignity and hope. Friends of Asha make a huge contribution to our activities through donations, fundraising events, volunteering and raising awareness of our work.

With a mission to bring hope to a seemingly helpless situation, a team of 14 members from St. Stephen's Church, Twickenham, did a sponsored 24 hours in the life of a slum dweller to raise money. The team spent the day in temperatures averaging minus 4 degrees. All the while it was snowing so living and sleeping outside in a shelter was a real challenge!

The day was spent enacting the lives of slum dwellers. They built slum huts using whatever waste material they could find and continued to live, cook and sleep there for the whole duration amidst the freezing weather.

The money they raised was used to provide for the essential improvements to the infrastructure of the health clinic and for basic provisions for the children's resource centre at Mayapuri. Thanks to the team, the children have got a new playground now.

Michael Tweed from Warwick University participated in the "Great Warwick Jump" – a fundraising skydive - and raised a total of £1,117.72 for Asha's work. "Students at Warwick were keen to give so that slum dwellers in Delhi would have the chance to go to university too", Michael said. We are really grateful for his bravery and for his fundraising efforts!

There are all sorts of things you could do to raise funds for Asha. If you organise something interesting, please send us details and photos, and you may be in this space next time!

SUPPORTERS FROM ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD CAN DONATE DIRECTLY TO US IN INDIA

Donating online is the simplest and most cost-effective way to support Asha. People from anywhere in the world can donate online in a number of currencies. To donate via our secure server, please go to: www.asha-india.org/Howcanyouhelp/Giving.aspx

Asha is registered to receive donations from overseas which means that we do not need to pay tax on any of your gifts. Sterling donations are acceptable, as are those in any other currency. If you'd like to make a valued contribution to our work, please fill in your details below, write a cheque made payable to "ASHA SOCIETY" and post it to us at this address:

The Administrator, Asha Society, Ekta Vihar, RK Puram Sector 6, New Delhi - 110022, INDIA.

Posting named cheques to India is a perfectly safe and secure method of making your donation. Please be assured that you will not incur any bank charges when donating directly to Asha in India.

Yes, I want to become a 'Friend of Asha'

- My contribution of _____ is enclosed.
- I would like to become a Hope Giver and contribute _____ every month. My first contribution is enclosed. Please send me a standing order form.
- I particularly want to contribute towards _____
- Please keep me informed about **Asha's** activities. My email is _____

Full name & title _____ Organisation (if any) _____

Address _____

City _____ Postcode _____

County _____

Only if you wish to Gift Aid your donation:

Please make your cheque payable to "Friends of Asha, GB" and mail to: Phil Leighton, Coordinator, Friends of Asha, (GB), Woodlands, 34 Knoll Road, Sidcup, Kent DA14 4QU, UK. Email: foasha.leighton@tiscali.co.uk Charity Registration No. 1085071

ASHA CURRENCY CONVERTER

- **£15** can buy a student stationery for one year
- **£30** can purchase course books for one year
- **£55** can provide a student with new clothes
- **£170** can cover university course fees for one year

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