

Volunteer Work beyond our Shores

It is said that a family that eats together stays together. Ours, is a family that does volunteer work together, stays together.

I come from a closely knit family. We have often gone out together; to the movies, picnics, even holidays. Our closeness and bond have strengthened through these activities. Families are known to do fun things together, but how about doing volunteer work as a family?

We are not new to doing volunteer work. Our parents and older siblings taught us to care for the less privileged in society. One need not come from a privileged background to do this. One only needs to have the heart.

We are all Singaporeans of many generations, with our fore-fathers having come to Singapore in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Having decided that we will embark on an overseas family volunteer project, we decided to first start in India and see where that takes us to.

Thus began our journey on doing volunteer work as a family. We named our team, "family affair". That was in 2007.

Since then, we have done five such trips, to different cities of India. First in Bangalore, second : Trivandrum, third : Mumbai, fourth again in Trivandrum and our last, which we just completed, in Chennai.

The aim of our family is very simple : to bring joy, happiness and hope to the marginalized children; the orphaned, less privileged, destitute, under-nourished and homeless children.

While it is the examination season here in May, with our children having to sit for their examinations, we take our own vacation leave, pack our bags and are off.

At this time, children in most states of India, have their annual summer holidays. For those who can afford, it is a time for vacation. But, for these children, there is nowhere to go and nothing to do. Time on their hands means time to get into trouble, roaming the streets and hours-on-end spent aimlessly.

So, during the two weeks spent with us, books are discarded and it is time for fun, laughter, music, dance and lots of handicraft work.

Every member learns an art and craft to be taught to the children. These activities are not just for the sake of fun. Rather, they teach the children hand and motor skills, colour perception, sensory skills and an appreciation of the craft itself.

To many of these children who can be employed in fire cracker factories, agarbathy (incense stick) factories, or even some children who were born in brothels, back to work in the brothels, it gives them another income-generating skill. Education is the only way out of the slums, but for those who cannot make-it in the academic world, we provide them with a skill that could become handy in later life. Our best to-date was in Bangalore, where the orphaned children now create t-shirts to be sold, bringing an income to the orphanage. We also arrange outings to the cinema and a picnic.

Not all is fun and laughter. We inculcate values in these children : values of caring for the environment, love and

respect for all, equality of gender, and most importantly, self-respect, self confidence and worth. These children have not been praised throughout their lives and seem to think of themselves as of little value to society. In the activities we do with them, we highlight their talent and reward them with balloons, toys and stationery. This gives them self-worth and importance.

The team is a non-registered, non-religious and non-governmental organization. All the funding that is required for each such project is raised from the other family members and people who believe in our cause.

Ours is to bring joy, hope and laughter to these destitute children, who have almost nothing. In seeing the faces of these dust-coated, tiny-bodied children break into a smile makes our trip complete and brings a sense of worth to what we do.

And what does the family learn? We have seen what another side of a society lives-in. And we appreciate what we have and for the loved ones with us. We are grateful for the joy, love and hope that we have. And we wish to give these to the children.

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Activities by Children...

