

2011 Fund for Teachers Trip to India

“Be the change you want to see in the world.” This quote from Mahatma Gandhi has always inspired me. Receiving a Fund for Teachers Expeditionary Learning grant this past year gave me the opportunity to walk in Gandhi’s footsteps and imbibe the wisdom of India.

My assistant principal and co-teacher, Geetha and her two girls, along with 12 of our former students all started fundraising and jumped right into the adventure! These students used to be in my Humanities class and many participated in our afterschool service club called “Youth United.” They all worked on service projects back when they were in our Middle School and care deeply about doing whatever they can to help address the inequalities in our world. Even though these alumni are all at different high schools or colleges now, when they all heard about my Fund for Teacher application to travel to India to do service work, they all jumped on board!

Here is the link to the long version of the trip film: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tqu0eLi_CeI

We spent our first 11 days in Ahmedabad, visiting numerous inspirational places. First we visited the Riverside School in Ahmedabad, India- a pre-k-12 school dedicated to “being the change.” Our students spend the week living in homestays with students from Riverside. The Riverside staff was also quite wonderful and helped us learn about their school and experience their classes firsthand. We all took Hindi classes everyday and the Hindi teacher taught us all a beautiful, but difficult poem in Hindi. The Riverside students taught our students a challenging Bollywood dance which they performed after just two days of rehearsal!

I learned firsthand about Riverside School’s “Design for Change” challenge from their dedicated staff and student body. The “Design for Change” is motivating students all over the world to do their part to design realistic projects that engage children in making positive changes in their own communities. Riverside School holds the character trait, “Persistence” in high esteem and feels that with determination and persistence, anything is possible. Each class carries the theme of Persistence throughout every year of school, along with an ongoing community service project.

“Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated failures. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

- Calvin Coolidge

Thanks to our partnership with Riverside, we were able to participate in a number of deeply moving service experiences. First we visited the Gandhi Sabarmati Museum and Ashram, as well as Gandhi’s non-profit organization, called Manav Sadhna, which sponsors a myriad of incredible programs in the slums of Ahmedabad. The museum is not only home to an archive of Gandhi’s teachings, letters and visual history but it was also his home for 17 years. Geetha and I collected books, photos and artifacts and photographed every display in the museum, in addition to filming over 10 hours of video footage to bring back to our school during our journey. We have also created a short film about our journey to India which we plan to use in our expedition and our community outreach this year.



Our year-long expedition this year will focus on the questions, “Can one person make a difference? Can one person change the world?” We will explore human rights, civil rights, Martin Luther King and Gandhi and other Nobel Peace Prize winners and embark on our own activist campaign for increasing literacy in Santa Fe.

We will explore the history of the American civil rights movements and Dr. Martin Luther King – reflecting on how Gandhi’s life and beliefs inspired and influenced Dr. King in his writings on nonviolence. Dr. King frequently acknowledged the influence of Mohandas K. Gandhi, who led nonviolent campaigns against racial discrimination in South Africa and later against British colonial rule in India. We will contrast and compare Gandhi’s concept of nonviolent action, satyagraha, with Dr. King’s. We will watch films such as *The Children’s March* and *Gandhi* and *The Great Debators* and read primary source texts, including Dr. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and Gandhi’s autobiography, along with numerous other books and articles.

Gandhi described this ashram as “the right place for our activities to carry on the search for truth and develop fearlessness.” I felt a deep fount of courage and peace there, especially when we were interacting with the children who live at his orphanage. One of our alumni students described his time playing with the children there as “the best time of my life!”



After playing at the orphanage, we walked across the street to the largest slum area in Ahmedabd, with over 2 million people living in dire poverty. We were all deeply moved by the intense smiles of the children and their fearlessness in playing and interacting with us. Despite the extreme heat, flies, trash, lack of sewers and running water and the poverty surrounding them, these children radiated happiness and open hearts. It was so moving to play with them and hold their hands.



We visited a beautiful community center in the middle of the slum which was a powerful testament to the change that is beginning to happen thanks to people like those at Gandhi's ashram. The Manav Sadhna community center offers computer classes, daycare, art classes, and education in the center of the slum. The center was made entirely of recycled materials- even the walls were made from ash mixed with cement and were filled with glass bottles and even old computer keyboards! They have so many great programs, including "Earn and Learn" during which kids receive an education and also make cards and earn money so that their parents don't have to send them out to work.

We also visited Prabhat, a center for children and young people with disabilities. It was so inspiring to see all they are doing with so very little. The people there are very dedicated and again, the kids are just too cute! Our group just jumped right in and started helping out and getting tons more back than we were giving. The kids danced for us and made us all smile from ear to ear. The director of Prabhat took us on two house calls into the slums. The staff at Prabhat perform outreach visits to very poor families who cannot afford to come to the center, or who don't take their child outside of the home. Prabhat serves over 600 children who are unable to visit their center. Since there are so many families who never take their child out of the house because of the stigma of having a child with disabilities, this organization also works to change those attitudes by getting these children out of the home and making these children more desirable to peers and neighbors.



For example, we visited this one adorable little boy who was 8, but looked 2. He has microencephaly and was previously shunned by the other kids and neighbors. Thanks to the team from Prabhat, who brought toys and physical therapy items to the home, he is now quite popular with the other kids, who like to come to his home and play with his toys with him. Once they got to know him, they all liked him. They also take these kids out to parks sometimes, which is the only time they get outside. Apparently, our visit, also helped to increase the positive feeling

the people have about kids with disabilities-“If these foreigners came all this way to visit him, he must be cool...” Our alumni students were terrific about not reacting to the smells or the extreme poverty. The director of the program said he wished that more Indian kids were like our kids. He said when most people visit they can’t help but “make faces” which is not helpful.

As some of you may remember, we raised money during our Lagaan performances last year and we received some donations for this trip (thank you Maria and Lawrence!) and our group decided to donate quite a bit of this money to these two programs. They were so happy and so were we!! It feels so good to know the money will go directly to such great programs!

We learned about the wide range of ways that students at Riverside serve their community. Each grade participates in an ongoing community service project. We accompanied the 10th grade students who have created a program called, HEAL,” which involves spending two hours each Saturday entertaining children in a cancer ward, hoping to distract them from their pain. We went to the Civil Hospital, which is a government run hospital, and played games with the kids in the pediatric oncology ward. The students organized games, activities, and artwork, and basically distracted the kids from their pain for a while.



We also accompanied Riverside students to a Bollywood film along with 80 children from the slums who ordinarily would never have the chance to go to the cinema. At first the power was down, so we played outside with the kids until the electricity came back. It was so much fun in the theater, especially when the kids would all roar and cheer during an exciting part of the film. Their cheering would grow and peak, like a wave washing over the audience from one side to the other.

Another Riverside outreach program partners a group of Riverside School high school girls who have been teaching music, songs, theater and dance to a group of young girls from a school for the blind. We felt honored to be able to watch several performances of these talented, visually impaired young girls.

The second part of the film illustrates our time in Kerala at the MA Math, Mata Amritanandamayi ashram. Kerala was beautiful and quite a bit cooler than Ahmedabad. The ashram is located on a small strip of land bordered by the beautiful backwaters on one side and the Indian Ocean on the other. The students jumped right into service and on their very first day found themselves doing recycling work. The folks at the recycling center were so taken by their work and great attitudes, that they asked us to make a film about recycling to show the college students who lived at the ashram. There are hundreds of students attending the Amrita University there who live at the ashram and they all need help learning how to reduce, reuse and recycle. We made a short film designed to inspire the students to start sorting and reducing their waste. Here is the link for that film:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjRtHCmNz0s>



We all had an incredible time meeting people from all over the world and experiencing the spiritual side of India. Watching Amma bless people non stop for 15 hours everyday was awe inspiring. There were so many beautiful things that happened there. We had two private yoga classes with a fantastic teacher from France who has promised to visit Santa Fe this year and teach some classes! The classes were quite powerful, especially as we could hear the waves crashing on the beach during the classes. Some of the students learned meditation, some did composting work, and we all learned how to make strong bags out of old newspaper. It was quite powerful living at the ashram and everyone learned a lot about themselves and got closer to nature. Especially the bugs!

One of our favorite experiences was visiting Ammachi's orphanage in Paripally. The children were so strong and confident and blew us away with their beautiful singing and dancing and their traditional arts performances. We also performed for them and then spent quite a bit of time playing games with the children. We taught them many SFSAS favorite drama and PE games which were a big hit. We all fell in love with the children who were clearly very well cared for and loved. We learned that their school has been winning academic awards for years, especially in Sanskrit and the Arts.



We also had the opportunity to take a boat trip down the backwaters which was quite lucky, since they only schedule the trips when it's not raining, and our scheduled boat trip day was the only day it didn't rain in the afternoon!

We had quite an adventure on our trip home. We traveled 4 hours by bus to Cochin, then flew by plane to Mumbai and then Dehli. When we finally left Dehli and got up in the air on our way to Chicago, the pilot announced that we

would have to turn around and make an emergency landing back in Dehli, after dumping our fuel. There was some serious mechanical problem. He added that he hoped it would be a smooth landing, but that it might take some time to dump the fuel. When we finally arrived back in Dehli it was 3 am and they announced that there were no other flights available. They would have to fix the plane and hopefully there would be another flight the next day. They packed us all on buses and no one knew where we were going. There were many unhappy families, tons of babies and little kids, but our group stayed calm and collected. Little did we know that they were taking us to one of the nicest hotels in the world, the Grand Hotel, New Dehli! We spent the rest of the day until 10 pm that night at the fanciest hotel any of us had ever seen! That is why there are so many pictures of mouth watering treats and a beautiful bathroom at the end of the film.

When we finally got back on the plane that evening, they announced that we couldn't take off because Uzbekistan had not yet given permission for us to fly over their country! We finally left when Uzbekistan gave their permission!

When we arrived in Chicago it was quite chaotic for everyone on our plane who was trying to make connections and they informed us that we could not all get on a flight to Albq. I kindly informed them that we all had to stay together and we were determined to all make it back home as a group. When the woman behind the desk saw Lucas' trick that he does with his hair (see the final picture in the film) she relented and got us all seats on the same plane.

I once asked someone how she could stay so hopeful when faced with so much darkness in our world. She replied that all we each have to do is to light our own small light and hold it up in the darkness. This Fund for Teachers opportunity has helped give me the strength to continue to hold up my little light in the darkness. It has given me an even stronger sense of hope for the future. I feel more sure than ever that education and persistence and connecting children to the world will help light up our world.

Thank you to everyone who sent us support and everyone who supports Santa Fe School for the Arts & Sciences and our kids- they are the future.

Rayna Dineen
Principal & Middle School Humanities Teacher

