



JANUARY 2009 INDIA TRIP REPORT

By Emancipation Network Director Sarah Symons, with excerpts from the blogs of our new Sales Director Paul Suit, and volunteers Susan Loftin, Dan Spacek and Sue Carter



In January, 2009, we brought a team of fourteen volunteers to Calcutta to work at five area shelters and trafficking prevention programs.

- ***Sanlaap's Sneha shelter home*** for rescued survivors. *Currently there are 130 girl survivors of brothel slavery living in this shelter, age 9 to early twenties*
- ***Apne Aap***, a trafficking prevention program in the Kidderpore red light district, which serves 200 women and children. *Mothers and children in this community face stigmatization, grinding poverty, and constant menace. Without intervention, the young girls would almost certainly be forced into prostitution alongside their mothers.*
- ***Nijuloy and Child Care Homes*** – *Two deeply caring shelters serving 150 child and teen survivors, and extremely high risk children from local red light districts - operated by the Women's Interlink Foundation.*
- ***Our own Destiny Center***, where 15 young women survivors work, and receive help with reintegration and life skills development

The purpose of this project was to promote healing through the arts and through personal connections between survivors and our staff and volunteers.

Throughout the year, TEN maintains a presence in these communities, and offers help to survivors and partner agencies through income generation programs, school sponsorships, and funding for medical and emergency needs. The yearly volunteer trips give us the opportunity to witness firsthand the transformation in the lives of survivors.

We are building strong personal relationships with the people we serve, and with our partner organizations. As girls progress on their journey from rescue and aftercare to an independent life, we track their progress and adapt our programs to address their changing needs.

For example, during this trip:

We noticed that one of the survivors at our Destiny Center was experiencing abdominal pain, and sent her to the hospital during our visit. It turned out she had a life-threatening hemorrhaging cyst, and were able to fund a life-saving operation with money raised by the volunteers on this trip.

We committed to help fund the building of a simple structure to be used as a schoolroom for newly rescued survivors at Sanlaap

SANLAAP - PRESCHOOL PAINTING PROJECT:

At Sanlaap, we had been invited to do a specific project – painting and furnishing a preschool for the young children of survivors who are rescued pregnant or with babies. Because traffickers use the babies as another means to control and imprison the girls, they have been hesitant to leave their babies in the care of others at the shelter, which would allow them to attend school or learn job skills.

Sanlaap's visionary founder Indrani Sinha is always looking for new ways to help and empower the girls in her care, and it was Indrani's idea to create a space so beautiful and inviting, it might inspire the young mothers to leave their children there.

We enlisted the help of 25 survivors, including some recently rescued Nepali girls, who were still quite traumatized. Because these girls speak an obscure tribal language that none of the Sanlaap staff speak, they have been somewhat isolated since their rescue, which was a matter of great concern to Becky and myself, as well as to the Sanlaap social workers.

Fortunately, we were able to bring a translator, Rangita. On our first day, we took Rangita outside to invite the girls to join us. We approached a group of 10 girls, who were sitting, as usual, in a tight circle, far from all the others. They looked somber, quiet, and painfully young (9-14) to already be survivors of brothel slavery. When Rangita walked up to them, the girls recoiled ever so slightly, closing ranks, looking anxious. But when she opened her mouth and spoke to them in their own language, their faces broke into the most amazing smiles – a mixture of surprise, joy, and something like relief. It was the most amazing and profound moment of human connection. It felt like home. It was probably the first time they heard an adult speaking their language in more than a year.

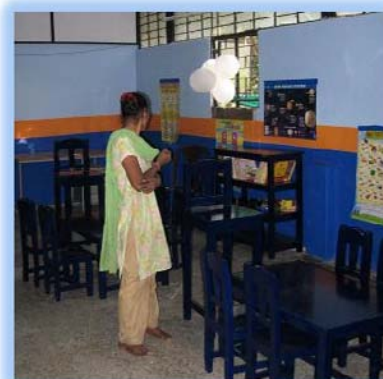
Rangita stayed with the girls for half an hour and then they began venturing, by twos and threes, up to our workspace. They were very reserved with us, their faces blank and unreadable, but some girls took the paintbrushes and set to work.



BEFORE



DURING



AFTER!

Susan and Paul set up a craft area and 12 girls sat in a circle watching us demonstrate how to make puppets out of paper bags. The next half hour was pretty tough going. We tried to engage the girls in the project but most held back, just looking down at the supplies in silence, not meeting our eyes. I wondered if paper bag puppets were too juvenile a project for this group of young teens who have already experienced so much adult suffering, forced to dress as adults and to be used by adult men. In fact the issue turned out to be that some of the girls, who were trafficked from remote rural villages, did not know how to use glue or scissors.

We witnessed both a material and an emotional transformation over the course of the next 6 days, with 10 girls painting with ever-increasing speed and enthusiasm, and 15 delving further and further into the craft projects, their creativity flourishing with ever more elaborate designs. On our

last day, we celebrated the beautiful new schoolroom with a ceremony and a giant ice cream party for all 130 girls at the shelter.

Susan wrote: *I spent the day working with survivors. Young, lost, sold, alone. After a day of puppets, sticky with glue and soaked with giggles, I got this note...*

To Susan Aunt, Please take my love. Aunty, don't forget me. I always remember you in my heart. I love you Susan Aunt so much. God bless you... With love=Jane (name changed)

Jane is in the 10th class (grade) and is small, like a cupcake. Chocolate, with red icing. She made me a gift, too -a small heart, out of felt, glue and googly eyes. It is now my most treasured possession. My guess is you can see why...I can't think of anywhere I would rather be.



In Dan's words: *I have put off painting rooms in my house for years now, simply because I can't stand all the preparation and cleanup. but at Sanlaap, it's different. Here, painting is a vehicle for personal expression, even liberation... not to mention that it's a total blast!*

From the first day, the girls have had a great time getting in there, donning their makeshift smocks, and going to town with the brushes and rollers! I can't tell you how many times all of us volunteers have stood back and just been in awe of the serious joy with which these girls are transforming their space. And not only is it beautiful to watch the space being transformed, but the girls as well.

Unlike the other sites we're working at this week, Sanlaap is a shelter for survivors of human trafficking and sexual slavery. Most of the girls with whom we work have faced the horror of being sold and bought, and made to do things no child, or human, should ever be made to do. It is sobering and heartbreaking to be working together and laughing with these girls, and then to realize that so many of them have lived through hell... some of them are 9, 10, and 12 and virtually all of them have been betrayed by the adults and the world that should have protected them. And yet, here they are, surviving and living.

They are deeply traumatized, but laughing; wounded, but healing; afraid, but taking significant steps toward trusting again. *And when i watch them paint, and laugh, and when their personalities and individuality and brilliance begin to emerge, I feel such clarity about why i am here.*

I simply cannot witness their resilience and never-say-die spirit and then do nothing in response... I must, we all must, do anything we can to help them trust their world again, trust adults/men again, trust in the possibilities of life again.



Yesterday I was washing up, and one of the girls was helping me clean my hands. She was being very meticulous, knowing that I was about to eat, and after she finished I said, "danyabad" ("thank you" in hindi). As soon as I said it she looked at me wide eyed but with a smile and said "No!" and she explained to me that I am her big brother ("dada" in bengali) and she is my little sister ("bon" in bengali) and that's just what family does for each other. No "thank you" is necessary.

I was blown away - both by the assertive power of her "No!" and by her care for me as her "big brother." and it made me think - "this girl deserves a family that will stand up for HER and care for HER that way..."

ALL CENTERS – VISUAL ARTS AND DANCE PROJECTS:

At all four centers, we offered a series of **art projects designed to foster self-expression** and provide opportunities for personal connection, healing, play and fun. These included Bangara dance (a high-energy Punjabi art form), origami, watercolor wax-resist painting, and puppet making.

TEN's relationship with Nijuloy and Child Care Home is very new, so this was the first time we have sent volunteers to those shelters. It's often awkward at first because initially the staff members are quite reserved and unsure of how this project is going to work. Because of the security issues, and the extreme sensitivity of the issue of child trafficking and sexual exploitation, shelters are understandably cautious about allowing outsiders in to work with their kids. However, our programs and volunteers were hugely popular with the children, and we took great care, as always, to keep the **focus on the present and the future**, never asking personal questions or treating anyone with pity. As the week progressed, the NGO staff opened up and became enthusiastic about this new partnership.

Our involvement in these children's lives will be ongoing and we took comfort in that when it came time to leave. We look forward to returning in the coming years to watch these children grow up, and to contribute to a safe and empowered life for each one of them.

***Paul explains:** This was my first time at the Apne Aap shelter, and I was the definition of pure bliss while I was there. I hadn't had that experience yet where the kids freak out and want to play because I had been at places that have recently trafficked kids and they of course had a different demeanor. The kids at Apne Aap are the children of women in the brothels and they live there with them. They come to Apne Aap during the day just to be safe and get a education... I will always cherish that experience for as long as I live. It was hard for me as well and I was fighting back tears all day. To look at these big, bright smiling faces and know where they would be going that night and every night ripped my heart out and into a million little pieces. The sad thing is they will be in the next room while their mother "works". I can't even imagine what that must be like not only for the kids but the mothers. It's just wrong on so many different levels.*



At the Destiny Center and at Apne Aap, we were also able to offer a photography workshop. **Taking photos was a new means of self-expression** for most of the participants, and they loved both the technological and creative aspects of this workshop. The families in the Kidderpore neighborhood do not have photos of their children – for most, these prints will be their only visual record of childhood.

For some of the older girls, survivors of brothel slavery, this was an opportunity to view their bodies and their beauty in a new way – not as something to be taken and used by clients, but instead as a gift that they themselves now control and enjoy.

BAY OF BENGAL OUTING:

An all-day outing to the Bay of Bengal was a highlight of this year's volunteer trip. All told, there were 92 in our party, including our volunteers, our Destiny girls, the Apne Aap kids and their mothers from the Kidderpore red light area.

Leaving the red light district is difficult due to the extreme stigma surrounding prostitution trafficking. Many rarely leave their destitute, neighborhood of crumbling concrete and plastic tarp, and many had never seen the sea, even though it is only three hours away.



It was a high point of my life to see the kids' excitement to take the first boat ride, and just to play in a beautiful natural setting. We hired two buses, and enjoyed a very long day of joy, singing, dancing, badminton, boating, talking, nutritious food (especially important because many of the children are seriously malnourished) and splashing on the muddy beach. Many of TEN's **school sponsored children** from Apne Aap were able to come on the outing, so it was a great opportunity to spend time with them and to get photos and updates for their sponsors



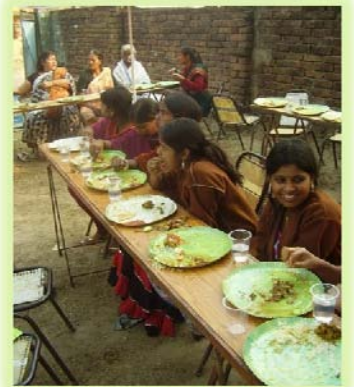
Many thanks to all our community for making our work possible! The happy memories of these workshops and the positive outcomes from our presence in these communities will carry on long into the future.

These young people are inspiring – As survivors and community leaders, they can

play a vital role in the worldwide abolition movement. **As always, I am profoundly grateful to be able to be part of their lives.**

Paul sums up: *My biggest take away from India will be the amazing energy and love the children we have seen here still have despite everything they have been through. They are also faced with such huge obstacles in their life but somehow I know they can overcome them. They are the strongest people I have ever met. These children should never be underestimated...The people of India are what make it the incredible place it is and I hope for them all the best the world has to offer.*

It's only just begun....We can make a huge dent in the trafficking issue. I know we can. Even though it seems so major and so overwhelming it can be done. History has proven that. Namaste!



Sue blogged this prayer: *India, please wait for me. I will awaken soon and will peel the layers one by one of your warm cloaks and shawls, covering me like an invisible protection as I work with your women and children in pain. I will peel off these layers and beg to begin to understand a glimpse of what these girls are experiencing. My heart aches for them. Please sleep calmly tonight little ones. My love desires to protect you, to comfort you, to bring new hope to your hearts. Pleasant dreams, sleep tight.*

Your beautiful dark eyes tell such stories to me. I will listen.