

HELPING DEAF YOUTH BREAK THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

AN INTERVIEW WITH RUMA ROKA, FOUNDER OF NOIDA DEAF SOCIETY



Ruma Roka (left) and Geeta Hasija (right) at AIF's Annual Washington, D.C. Gala on November 6, 2013

The American India Foundation recently hosted Founder, General Secretary and Mentor of Noida Deaf Society (NDS) Ruma Roka and one of her students, Geeta, to the United States, where they shared moving stories of the work NDS does to integrate Deaf people into Indian society at the Annual Galas in Washington, DC. and Chicago.

As we sit down to tea with Ruma and Geeta to chat before their next event, Ruma admits to already feeling a little homesick. Given the relationships she has built with the Deaf community in India, it's no surprise. Her genuineness and affection for her students is immediately obvious, and she tells us, signing simultaneously, that she sees her former student as a daughter. Geeta smiles in response.

Geeta agrees to share a bit of her personal story with us, which Ruma interprets. Geeta lost both parents years ago, and struggled, as Deaf children across India do, with education. School taught her nothing – there were no interpreters, and words written on the chalkboard were incomprehensible to her. Ruma explains how difficult it is for many Deaf children to understand written script, having never heard the phonetics of the words.

After hearing about NDS, Geeta travelled from her home in Haryana to attend courses in employable skills and help her find a job.

NDS employs Deaf instructors who relate to their students and serve as positive role models, and classes are conducted in Sign Language with visual aids. Geeta was able to learn all the things she could not in school, like geography and world history, how to read and write in English, and workplace skills like basic computing. Technology was new to Geeta, and learning how to use the Internet and how to type opened her up to new worlds of communication. Ruma points out that the Deaf community has particularly benefitted from the advent of visual technology, such as video chat software. Surrounded by others who have shared their struggles and no longer ostracized but ac-

cepted for who they are, their visions of themselves change significantly.

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The most valuable part of what NDS offers is a set of life skills such as confidence, communication, and teamwork – skills that are also highly valued by employers. NDS also offers a workplace ethics curriculum, co-developed with AIF. However, the largest obstacle for Deaf youth comes from a childhood spent in silence. Many of the youth who come to NDS come from the poorest areas of India – ...

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ON THE GROUND



Left – Nika Kunwar with students in Bangalore where she volunteered. Right – Aditi Ahuja and Aria Sundaram share their experiences volunteering in India with AIF supporters in New York.

HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH VOLUNTEER IN INDIA

This summer, AIF was fortunate to welcome the service of three American high school students, who volunteered as teachers, mentors, and peers in the Digital Equalizer in South India. Below, Aditi Ahuja, Aria Sundaram, and Nika Kunwar share their motivations for volunteering and what the experiences meant to them.

Why did you want to volunteer with AIF?

Aditi: I greatly enjoyed tutoring at a youth enrichment program called Street Squash and I was dancing in India, so I wanted to take the opportunity to continue to tutor in India.

Aria: I was looking for a volunteer opportunity to help me understand the struggles of the less fortunate.

Nika: Going to India, I've only visited family or been a tourist. I had noticed the drastic differences between how I live here and how many kids live there. I wanted to work with kids my age or younger and connect with India in a deeper way.

What was your experience volunteering at a school?

Aditi: We decided to give presentations on culture to broaden the students' horizons. We showed them different customs, clothes, cities, foods, utensils, entertainment, and music, which they would never have access to without the Internet.

Aria: The teachers told us the students

had learned everything in the books, but when we started teaching, we realized that the kids' abilities were actually far behind. So, we created basic presentations on addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, going over the problems they got wrong to make sure they were really learning.

Nika: Every child was so grateful to have more time in the computer lab. Even though I was only able to help them out a little, it felt so good to be around the kids and teach them as well as learn from them.

What were some of the challenges you experienced?

Aditi: The first one was the lack of Internet, which interfered with our original plan. There was also a significant language barrier.

Aria: It was really hard to work in the Tamil based school – they were preparing for exams and we couldn't help much with that. We did ask to be transferred to an English medium school, where we were able to teach math and English. We gave them a written test on math and English and saw a really significant improvement in their math skills.

Nika: It was hard to communicate, as I did not speak Kannada. However, we did practice speaking English. Another challenge was that Internet access was not a guarantee. Many of the activities I had

planned involved the Internet, so I had to think on my feet and create other projects to do with the children.

Would you return to India to do similar work in the future? Did this experience change any of your goals?

Aditi: I gained a new perspective on the education system in communities with very little money. While I hope that we instilled a desire to explore and to question in students, I know that their enthusiasm to learn will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Aria: The significant improvement in their mathematics and English skills was great to see, but we also got to form relationships with each kid. They loved seeing us and were excited to learn. I definitely would love to work in India again – this experience has nurtured my love of teaching.

Nika: It was an extremely humbling experience to see people who had the bare minimum still strive for excellence and achieve it. I would love to be able to go back to Bangalore specifically to revisit the schools I worked at – I would want to work with the students on improving their English, as that is a crucial part of their education.

Aditi Ahuja is a senior at Riverdale Country School in New York City, NY.

Aria Sundaram is a sophomore at the Dalton School in New York City, NY.

Nika Kunwar is a sophomore at Menlo School in Menlo Park, CA. ■

ON THE GROUND

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(CONTINUED)

...Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh – where schooling is minimal. Their parents are busy working, and do not have time to learn Sign Language; as a result, Deaf children grow up unable to communicate. “Can you imagine going through life without ever expressing anything?” asks Ruma. Basic life skills such as positive thinking, self-assurance, sharing, and conflict resolution are often learned for the first time at NDS. Although many Deaf youth are

Geeta first interviewed for a job with Access Bank Foundation, and passed the technical test – but was still wait-listed for a year. Although the Indian government has quotas for hiring Deaf people, the queues are long and they move slowly. Many Deaf youth go for years without hearing back from employers.

Geeta finally heard back after a year, and was able to start her new job in operations at Access Bank in Delhi. When asked about her job, Geeta says that she enjoys the work, and wants to stay there as she gains more and more confidence. “I want to work hard, grow and be promoted, and make a career out of it – just like hearing people,” she asserts.

Since its founding in 2005, Noida Deaf Society has helped thousands

“It’s not only about training the Deaf,” Ruma says. “It’s also about training employers and changing their mindsets. Deaf people must also have opportunities for sustainable livelihoods and be able to stand on their own two feet.”

NDS conducts orientations for employers, teaching awareness and sensitization to top leadership rather than the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) department. “Charity is not sustainable. It needs to be a part of the organization, not a philanthropic opportunity.” NDS works with employers to create a Deaf-friendly environment. Every Deaf employee has a ‘buddy system’, where a hearing employee is the first point of contact for the Deaf employee as well as NDS. Only 40 to 50 signs need to be learned to be able to work effectively with Deaf people, which the ‘buddy’ can easily do. Deaf employees often learn and create new signs at work to interact more fully with hearing people – and Ruma herself learned a new sign for ‘mochachino’ from Geeta.

Ruma is particularly enthusiastic about Deaf children learning Sign Language from a young age, so that their development is not affected by lack of expression. To that end, she has already started a small nursery school where Deaf children ages 5-12 come to learn. Their parents tell Ruma that their kids now bother them incessantly about everything from school to what they want to eat for dinner. “And I tell them, ‘Good!’” Ruma exclaims, smiling. “That’s what kids should be able to do.” ■

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desperate for a job when they arrive, the experience of learning for the first time and being part of a community proves to be so fulfilling that they want to continue learning even more.

Today, there remains a strong level of resistance from employers to hiring Deaf employees. “The Deaf are the most marginalized community in the country,” says Ruma. “It [deafness] cuts them off completely from the rest of the world and society.”

of Deaf youth learn valuable skills, participate in their community, and find jobs. NDS trains about 800 Deaf people in employable skills annually. The main goal of NDS is not only to provide skills, but also ultimately to mainstream Deaf people into society. About the various organizations where Deaf people can go to learn skills, Ruma remarks, “They get a certificate saying they completed this course – but they still can’t find a job.”

IN THE COMMUNITY

EVENTS



ANNUAL WASHINGTON DC GALA

President of the Business Round Table and former Governor John Engler accepts his Honoree Award from AIF Washington DC Leadership Council member Sudhakar Shenoy at the Annual Washington DC Gala on November 6, 2013. He and Virginia Congressman Gerry Connolly were recognized for their altruism, inspiring leadership, and philanthropy. The Gala also showcased AIF's William J. Clinton Fellowship with a silent auction. The Gala's most poignant moments came from Ruma Roka, Founder and General Secretary of AIF partner organization Noida Deaf Society (NDS). The evening boasted comedian Dan Nainan as Master of Ceremonies and a musical performance by local DC artist Nita Chawla.



GURCHARAN DAS BOOK READINGS

AIF Board Chair Lata Krishnan listens to renowned author and commentator Gurcharan Das speak at a book reading and discussion – one of a series of such events held throughout the Bay Area this Fall. Gurcharan talked about his latest book, 'India Grows at Night – A liberal case for a strong state'. In his address to attendees, the author discussed the many facets of India's rise to power, and the lack of progress in the public sector. Event partners included the Silicon Valley Community Foundation and Commonwealth Club of California, drawing hundreds of audience members.



A CONVERSATION WITH AMBASSADOR WISNER AND RAVI VENKATESAN, MODERATED BY NIKHIL DEOGUN

Former Chairman of Microsoft India and author of 'Conquering the Chaos: Win in India, Win Everywhere', Ravi Venkatesan (center), and International Affairs Advisor at Patton Boggs LLP and former Ambassador, Frank Wisner (right) participate in a discussion about India's economy, moderated by Editor in Chief and Senior Vice President of CNBC, Nikhil Deogun (left). AIF, in partnership with the Harvard Business School Club of New York and Columbia Business School, held the book reading and discussion, which was hosted by the Consulate General of India on October 28, 2013.



CHICAGO GALA

AIF Board Member and Trustee Harit Talwar and AIF Trustee Reena Talwar, AIF CEO Ravi Kumar, Emcee Rohini Dey, and her husband Sajal Kohli at the Annual Chicago Gala on November 9, 2013. The evening honored Founder and Principal of Rosenbloom Advisors, LLC Lewis Rosenbloom, who was also a founding member of AIF's Chicago chapter. Leadership in Philanthropy Awards were presented to Jasbir and Sukhjit Gill, as well as President and COO of Discover Financial Services Roger Hochschild and his wife Stephanie.

SPOTLIGHT

ADOBE YOUTH VOICES –

IGNITING YOUNG PEOPLE'S CREATIVE CONFIDENCE



High school students prepare to shoot a documentary film about discrimination against women in Gurgaon, Haryana. (Photograph © Roopak Chauhan)

A project of the Adobe Foundation, Adobe Youth Voices (AYV) is a global initiative to ignite young people's creative confidence – the ability to harness creative skills to solve problems. AIF is AYV's largest partner in India, working together to empower youth in underserved communities with 21st century tools to communicate their ideas, exhibit their potential,

and take action in their communities. Engaging youth in the 13-19 age group, the program provides breakthrough learning experiences using video, multimedia, digital art, web, animation, audio tools and comics that enable youth to explore and comment on their world. AYV doesn't just increase confidence and communication skills – it uses creative outlets to teach children essential life and career skills as well, such as criti-

cal thinking and problem solving, media literacy, and social responsibility.

The AIF-AYV partnership started in 2007-08, and is currently operating across six states through two program models. The first is a *resource intensive model*, which provides a set of media equipment, laptop, projector, Adobe software, and weekly visits by Media Mentors. The second is an *essentials model*, which trains educators twice a year and provides a program guide, Adobe software, and online support.

To date, the program has enabled over 9,000 disadvantaged youth to discover self-expression through storytelling using modern technological tools, and empowered 200 educators with the tools to sustain the project. AYV students have already created more than a thousand media projects, which have collected numerous accolades and been screened at film festivals across the globe, such as the Seattle International Film Festival (*Water Problem*). Projects have been awarded 'Best Child Producer Award' at the NCERT National Children Film Festival 2012 (*Dengue*), 'Best Puppetry Award' at the NCERT National Children Film Festival 2011 (*Save Petrol*), and the 'Appreciation Award' at MustBol Film Contest (*Let's Fight Back*), among many others. ■

WHAT BEING AN AIF YOUNG PROFESSIONAL MEANS TO ME

BY ANOOP SHAH

AIF YP CO-LEAD, LOS ANGELES CHAPTER

My sister and I were born and raised in the United States, and our parents, the first ones in their respective families to come to America, felt it was important that we understand the heritage and culture of India. So, every year we would visit India to see the rest of our family. Issues that seemed so far removed from my life in California were daily concerns in India. Children would bang on our car door begging for money. Mothers would stand in the sweltering heat during rush hour traffic to hawk magazines. The monsoon rains would flood the coastal tents set-up by homeless people. Innocent people would be stopped by police officers seeking bribes.

These trips to India had a huge impact on me. I always returned to California with a greater appreciation for everything I had. While I do believe that the desire for something better provides motivation to achieve one's goals, I realized that it's as important to appreciate what you have and to help others who are less fortunate.

When I graduated from college and moved to New York, I was determined to help make a difference. While many great causes deserve support, my childhood experiences and pride as an Indian American inspired me to join a philanthropic organization where I could help address many of the systemic issues people in India face. Fueled by this desire, I joined the AIF Young Professionals chapter in New York. Upon moving to Los Angeles earlier this year, I continued my affiliation with AIF by becoming a co-leader of the Young Professional chapter there.

Both in New York and Los Angeles, spreading awareness of AIF's work and raising money for programs in India has been extremely gratifying. A paper led by Dr. Suzanne Richards at the University of Exeter Medical School recently found that volunteering is associated with lower depression, increased well being, and a 22% reduction in the later risk of dying. So if you are unsure about volunteering your resources to help someone else, just remember, give to live! ■

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FROM THE FIELD



AIF William J. Clinton Fellow Krupa Asher conducts an English language lesson for employees of the Merit center at Metia Bruz in West Bengal. Krupa, Class of 2011-12, was placed with AIF NGO partner Anudip Foundation to work in livelihoods. To date, the AIF Clinton Fellowship has sent 331 young professionals to work on development projects at 149 NGO partners across India, building the next generation of leaders. (Photograph © Prashant Panjiar)