

Dear all

1st October, 2007

I, along with Sukanya Das, am a project steward of the All Bengal's Women Union (ABWU) funded by Asha London Chapter. We fund 30 children's care and education through ABWU. The organisation was established 75 years ago and details about its various projects can be found at its website at www.abwu.org. One of its main programs is a primary school welfare program which caters to about 185 children providing them with clothes, food, medicine, education and counseling. Other interesting projects include the vocational and rehabilitation projects which focus on empowering vulnerable women with skills that help them live independently.

My friends Rita Nunes, Chris Fernau, Gitanjali Dasgupta and me had the opportunity to visit the organisation on the 24th of July. I include here a brief report about it. It is not meant to be a comprehensive report about how many pupils there are in each class but rather a flavour of what goes on.

ABWU is located in central Calcutta at the junction of New Market and Moulalli in a densely populated area home to a significant proportion of people living below the poverty line and street children. The colonial buildings there are uniformly blackened by the intense city smoke and we almost went past it driving around in circles. Anyway, we arrived there late afternoon just as school was finishing. As soon as I got there, I was greeted by kids of various ages who wanted to practise their English and we got caught up in a translation match switching between Hindi, Bengali and English.

Eventually, I met up with Ms. Amita Sen, Ms. Ratna Sen and other members of the management who talked about the various school activities and the vocational programme for older adults. She focused on the primary school and care for the orphans, as that is mainly what our funding supports. We were introduced to some of the kids that we directly support and once they got over being shy, they were really curious about where we were from. The older kids were keen to emphasise how important education was for their future. We then went on to see the various workshops in place with the main focus being on textiles, handicrafts and tailoring.

What I found interesting about ABWU is that beyond the simple schooling or care needs, there was a real emphasis on empowerment and on learning trades which would help you become independent. Also, kids who do really well scholastically are encouraged to go on to higher education. Some of the teachers and volunteers at the place are in fact former students of the primary school at ABWU.

Amita emphasised that the lot of the kids and young adults at the establishment are vulnerable individuals coming from broken families and have complex rehabilitation needs. They have 9 counsellors in place to help kids to come to terms emotionally with their background and to help them move on. Also, they have quite an interesting drama and music therapy program in place that has provided a highly effective outlet for the ABWU members to channel their emotional energy.

We spent a lot of our time just talking to children, asking them about how they spent their day and what their hobbies are. A lot of them mentioned the dance and drama classes that they attended. There were many requests to get photographed. So, we did end up taking quite a few pictures, which I will post shortly depending on whether it is appropriate to do so, and once, I ask the ABWU management about the protocol behind this.

Finally, we ended our day at ABWU with a visit to its old people's home situated right next to the school. Again, it was a delightful mix of just plain 'adda' (chatting), translations and soliloquies. The friendly energy of the old ladies was a great tonic. I met a really memorable old lady who had been an accomplished singer in her heyday and she sang me the first ever song that she learnt. It was definitely a pleasure to see the sparkle in her eye when she sang.

My ABWU visit was a thought provoking day. There are kids, young adults and older adults at the establishment who have been through a lot and probably have a host of problems that will never be

solved. The scale of the task faced by ABWU seems immense and the frustrations of finding funding, long term committed volunteers and maintaining a sense of continuity is indeed a mammoth task. However, the holistic steps they have taken towards providing healing, education, and a resting place and towards building a community is an inspiration and makes it a worthwhile project to support.

Ipsita Sinha

Asha Volunteer, and Project Steward for ABWU