



Report from the field:

Hollywood

June 2009

Q: How does an 8-year-old girl in India who doesn't own a pair of shoes get to walk the red carpet at the Oscars®?

A: She takes a train.



It is a long way from the dusty, dirt roads of Varanasi, India to the red carpet at The Oscars® in Hollywood.

8,116 miles to be exact.

But much more separates these two places than just distance.

In Hollywood you will find the richest, most famous, most beautiful people on the planet. Oscar®-winning actors make \$30 - \$40 million a year. (About \$307,692 a day.)

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in Varanasi who make
17 cents a day.



I have met day laborers in Varanasi who make 17 cents a day. In Varanasi, you will find the poorest people on our planet.

These two worlds never meet, except they did this past February in a very unlikely way. This letter will tell you how Smile Train — with your help — bridged the gap between two cultures that could not be farther apart.

It all started a few years ago when we visited our partner hospital in Varanasi. We were stunned to see more than 800 children on one single morning, in response to a few radio ads announcing a one-day registration for free cleft surgery.

I've been going on these trips for 15 years now and I had never seen anything like it.



800 desperately poor children with holes in their faces, on one morning, in one place, all asking for help. Each came with a mom and/or dad, or sibling, or grandparent. Altogether there were 2,000+ men, women and children in this very hot, crowded courtyard.

I will never forget the expressions on their faces.

They looked exhausted, tired, hungry, anxious and

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worried. Some had traveled for weeks to get here. Some had sold their meager possessions, borrowed money, walked for days, gone hungry, rode trains, boats and rickshaws, you name it.

They knew that this may be their only chance to ever receive the cleft surgery they so desperately needed. They did whatever they had to do to get here.

When they arrived, they were astonished at the number of children with clefts who had shown up. For many, it was the first time they'd seen another child with a cleft. More importantly, they were terrified that not everyone would be helped and that their child wouldn't make the list.

You could see the desperation in their eyes.

You could see the desperation in their eyes. "Please, please, please pick my child!" their



eyes were pleading with us as we walked by, stopping to meet many of them and hear their stories.

Lucky for these parents and these children, that G.S. Memorial is run by an amazing surgeon and an incredible human being who happens to be one of our very best partners. I feel lucky to know him. Dr. Subodh Kumar Singh is a true, modern-day Good Samaritan.





He has devoted his life to helping the poor. And no Smile Train hospital in the world helps more children than G.S. Memorial. This year he and his team will change the lives of more than 3,300 children.

The day we were there, Subodh and his folks examined, prodded, poked and registered 815 children with clefts and each and every single one received a surgery date! Not a single child was turned away.

Being there that day, seeing so many children, and seeing Dr. Subodh and his team of doctors and nurses in action, was very surreal, it was like something out of a movie.

And THAT is where we got the idea!

Why not do a movie about Smile Train and show people that miracles are still possible? That modern day Good Samaritans like Dr. Subodh still exist. And that it doesn't take much to change a little child's life forever.



We came back from that trip to Varanasi determined to tell that story to the world, via a blockbuster feature film that would make the whole world cry.

Boy, were we naive!

I wrote letters to every top movie studio, movie producer, agents, actors, you name it. I followed up with calls. I nagged. I begged. I did everything. I even went to LA and got some meetings with actual agents, writers and producers. A lot of people wanted our money, but nobody wanted our movie. No one cared about what we were doing — or the kids we were helping.

Time for Plan B. We decided to forget doing a feature film and to do a documentary instead. It is much cheaper. Less risk. We sent letters out to all the best documentary directors. When we met with Megan Mylan, the award-winning director of *Lost Boys of Sudan*, we knew right away that we had found the right person.

Megan is not only a huge talent, she has a huge heart.

She “got” our story right away. We loved her enthusiasm and her talent. It just felt right. We told her we had found the



Smile Train
turns despair into hope,
and tears into smiles.



perfect place to tell our story. She put her team together and traveled to Varanasi to shoot not once but twice, and she brought back a film that tells the story of Smile Train better than we ever dreamed.

Megan captured the poverty, the pain and the hopelessness.

She showed the power of Smile Train's unique strategy of empowering local doctors like Subodh and his team. She followed a very brave little boy and girl through the entire Smile Train experience and showed how this simple, inexpensive surgery can completely change a child's life forever. She showed how Smile Train turns despair into hope, and tears into smiles.

And she did it all without using a single word of English — the entire film is in Hindi with English subtitles!

How often would we have the opportunity to bring an 8-year-old girl with a cleft up on stage in front of 100 million people?

When we got the news in January that we had been nominated for an Academy Award®, the first decision we made was to bring the star of our movie, 8-year-old Pinki, to Hollywood.

This was not as easy as it sounds. Pinki did not own a pair of shoes never mind a passport. Her tiny village has no electricity, running water or phones or even paved roads. She had never used a fork or knife before, never slept in a bed. But we asked her and her Dad if they wanted to go to Hollywood and when they said yes, we moved heaven and earth to make it happen.

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I envisioned her raising the Oscar® as she said, (even though she doesn't speak English!) "I accept this award on behalf of the millions of children with unrepaired clefts in the world who cry themselves to sleep every night as they wait, and hope, and pray that someday, someone will come along and help them."

So Pinki came to America to "win her Oscar®" with her Dad and Dr. Subodh. She was on all the major networks and news shows including ABC, CNN, New York Times, People, CBS, etc. My favorite question was when someone asked her which of the other nominated movies she thinks will win. But the first and only movie Pinki has ever seen is the one she is in!



As a nominated movie, we received two tickets for the ceremony, one for Megan the director and one for Pinki. They walked the red carpet and mingled with the rich and famous. At one point Pinki was standing next to Angelina Jolie which was ironic because the surgery that saved Pinki cost less than one of Angelina's shoes.

When the big moment came and they announced, "And the winner is... *Smile Pinki*!" 26 of us watching in a viewing party screamed, hugged, hollered, cried and texted everyone we had ever met in our lives. Then we watched in amazement as Megan walked up on stage in front of 100 million people WITHOUT Pinki!

Little Pinki was fast asleep! We had brought her 8,116 miles for this moment but I guess 8-year-olds do what 8-year-olds do. It didn't matter. Megan gave a terrific acceptance speech and went home with a 13.5 inch golden statuette that will forever change her life, and we hope, change the lives of millions of children with clefts.

Winning an Oscar® has already changed our world. Over the past few months, we have gotten more publicity and media interest than we have over the past 10 years. Hundreds of thousands of people have come to our website and YouTube to watch the *Smile Pinki* movie trailer. We've licensed HBO to broadcast *Smile Pinki* which premieres in June and we have other big announcements in the works.

Pinki went home to India as a national hero! The government built her a new house made out of brick — not mud. They installed a handpump for water and even paved a road from the highway to her village. The villagers who used to call her names and throw stones at her now worship her. She even went to meet the Prime Minister and his wife.



Needless to say, they didn't let me on stage that night at The Academy Awards® but if they had, the first people I would have thanked would be our donors.

Our donors — like you — made Smile Train possible, which is what this film is all about. More importantly, our donors have given more than 500,000 children with clefts not just a new smile, but a second chance at life.

As a small token of our appreciation for your support, I will be sending you your very own copy of our Oscar®-winning film in the next month or so.

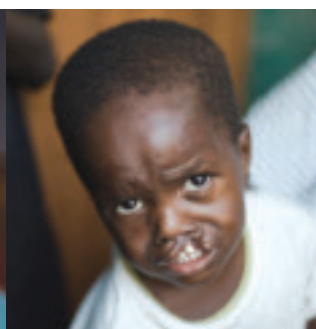


When you watch it, I hope you realize just how important our program is to so many children that have no place else to turn. And how important donors like you are to us.

And please don't worry that this Oscar® may have gone to our heads and we are in any danger of "going Hollywood." 24 hours after being at The Oscars®, we were right back to work in the slums of Haiti.

There are millions of kids out there who still need our help.

**Our donors – like you –
made Smile Train
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this film is all about.**



And we still need yours.

Thank you,


Brian



*Thanks For
Helping Us!*

P.S. Any advice, criticism, suggestions, ideas or feedback is always welcome and appreciated. Email me directly at brianm@smiletrain.org.

P.P.S. If you want to watch the 3 minute *Smile Pinki* trailer, visit our website www.smiletrain.org.

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who still need our help.
And we still need yours.

