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Enlightening minds

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Ashraya Initiative for Children's Education Outreach Programme is taking care of the education of 180+ kids, who live much below the poverty line. Tania Roy visits their home in Yerawada

The door of Ashraya in a slum at Yerawada swings open sharp at 6 am. And walking through it every morning are happy little feet and bright smiling faces who have dreams to live and big ambitions to pursue for a better tomorrow. Ashraya Initiative for Children's (AIC) Education Outreach Programme makes sure that all their needs are taken care of so that the kids can pursue education. "Right from giving them a bath to handing over clean, pressed uniform, to serving them breakfast and dropping them off to nearby schools, and serving them lunch and even helping them with tuitions, we see that nothing comes in the way of their education," says Bunty Pai, director, Education Outreach Programme. Bunty is the first Indian director for the programme and has been overseeing the operations since the past two months.

AIC, founded by Elizabeth Sholtys and Julia Neubauer, opened its doors to the first group of street children in 2005. Having spent time with street children in India, Elizabeth and Julia knew the needs of underprivileged kids and drafted programmes that would help cater to them.

Four programmes were initiated: Residential, a home for orphaned and abandoned street kids; Education Outreach Programme, which provides educational, material and emotional support to children from 3 to 17 years of age; Health Outreach Programme, which provides medical treatment and free health check-ups; and Community Outreach Programme to help empower women.

Enlightening us further, Manali Kulkarni, onsite Admin Director, says, "As part of the women's programme, our health coordinators conduct Mother-Baby class once a week at our health centre. They teach young mothers and expectant women about infant care and nutritional needs. Sometimes, the coordinators attend health conferences and transfer knowledge to the women or invite guest lecturers to deliver talks on healthcare."

To help empower women, AIC also conducts tailoring classes, both beginners and advanced, for women daily. "We have 15 to 20 women in each group. They are given a three-month training after which they awarded a certificate," says Manali. Many of the women who have undertaken the training have started their own tailoring enterprises, albeit small, but for the women, it's certainly a good start!

□ The Education Outreach Programme mainly provides education to two communities — Waghri and Sikligar — who live much below the poverty line. Says Bunty, "We have kids

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from the Waghri community, which is a marginalised nomadic tribe from Gujarat who live in abject poverty. And among the Sikligars, which is a male-dominated community, education for girls takes a backseat. So, when we sponsor a family, we refuse to support the education of boys unless their sisters are also given the opportunity to attend school."

AIC is leaving no stone unturned in mentoring and grooming the kids. Most of the children can converse in English and are quite well-mannered. Pre-primary kids attend classes at the AIC centre in Yerwada, while the older children go to nearby municipal schools. "Some bright kids also attend a private school, which is a few notches higher than municipal schools and the fees are also steep, but all the costs are borne by AIC," adds Bunty who, along with Manali and other staff members, is planning an exciting summer camp for the kids. "We will be conducting drama and art classes. We are also trying to tie up with schools to conduct soccer and basketball camps at their playgrounds, and hopefully we can involve both the genders," says Manali.

DONATE MATERIAL GOODS

You can donate notice boards, backpacks, socks and shoes, mirrors (for nursery kids), magnetic boards (for alphabets, numbers), etc to AIC. To know more, send a mail to contactus@ashrayainitiative.org



Comments

On 13/03/2013 09:33 AM **A.L.Sundaresan, BalaSundaresan** said:

Hey Bunty, v hv known all along that u r a natural sweetheart. V pray that u r able to impart the same maternal warmth and care to these kids as u do to ur own. Mother Teresa was queried on the extent to which one must stretch oneself in helping others. She said " Do it till it stops making u feel good and starts making u feel stressed" (wordings mine). V hv seen my mother being told by grown ups like Swathy's father Kuppaswamy and my borther- in- law Ganesan & others " I am your fifth son". Amma wud say wth total conviction and love " Of course u r " & ther wud b such peace all around. "Bunty" is a work-in-process. She is evolving and will reach colossal heights. V all knw that. But i also pray that in the process she shud not stop being the tender angel that she is and turn into a stern missionary. God bless u dear. Sundar, Bala.

On 27/02/2013 09:28 AM **Annapoorni & A.L. Narasimhan** said:

What a fulfilling engagement. We have been wanting to participate in any activity that manifests compassion. We have or imagine we have physical limitations. Could you suggest anything that we could do to feel one with your effort such as underwritng expenses of one or more children though I see your emphasis on material goods as donations. Here is wishing your mission great progress and God's grace.

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