



Letter from the President

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President's Letter.

It's been a hot summer in India! But what a summer it's been! We've hosted nearly 100 volunteers over the summer, in four different sessions. Each session has been special in its own way. The people who have come, have served with love, and have each left a bit of their hearts in India. The colonies have been treated to several hygiene clinics. In these clinics, the volunteers go to a specific colony carrying a bucket of clean water and armed with a bar of soap. They clean the hands and the feet of the patients, treating any wounds and bandaging them up. They also bandage up hearts that are broken with neglect and discouragement. One patient remarked that the person washing his hands and feet was like God, himself. The volunteer had come with healing, as our patient believed God would do, one day.

The children have been progressing in their English proficiency. Some of the newer students have just started learning English. Most of them had never even heard it spoken at all before coming to Rising Star Outreach. But it's much easier to learn a language when you've fallen in love with people that speak that language! This is one of the great things that the volunteers do—they provide that love and the motivation for the kids to learn a new language. Each volunteer has spent many hours tutoring kids in English under the mango trees next to the school. There's a beautiful grove of trees that provide excellent shade. The volunteers bring woven mats to sit on, along with creative and fun English drills.



Not only do the students get a substantial boost to their English speaking abilities, but they develop some pretty strong bonds with the volunteers, as well.

At night, the volunteers go to the "families" they're assigned to and assist the housemothers in getting the children ready for bed. Of course, that includes reading a bedtime story and helping them to write in their journals. More fun bonding time! The volunteers then take time to write in the children's journals, as well—little cute stories and/or observations about the child. The children love that someone is helping them to record their childhood.

The volunteers have also been busy in the colonies with projects to help support micro-lending. A goat shed was built for the Vallajabad Colony. Then 16 goats were delivered to start the colonists' goat-raising businesses. In

the Putherankottai Colony, fences were built so that each family could grow a vegetable garden without having roaming goats, chickens, or cows eating their produce. The volunteers have also painted the children's hostels and helped the new children adapt to Rising Star.

Volunteers haven't been the only busy ones this summer. We're constantly amazed at the support we receive from our sponsors. After sending out a newsletter asking for help in collecting thumb drives, we had a sponsor send us 80 in the mail! To top it off, this same sponsor then went on to send us 10 Intel laptops for the children! That, frankly, is like a gift from heaven! A big thanks to Bill Davidson!

We have received some interest in helping with a photography school. We still need to collect ten digital cameras. These cameras will make it possible for some of our patients to document their own lives and the lives of their friends in a leprosy colony. Our hope is to get these stories out to the world. What a great way to give a voice to a people who have been shunted away by the world for far too long. If you have a camera you can donate, please send it to our office at 6241 Indian River Dr, Norcross, GA 30092. Or if you would rather donate to have a camera purchased for the photography class, you can send \$150 earmarked for a camera.

If you want to spend a heart-warming afternoon or evening, go to our Executive Director, Amy Antonelli's blog,

<http://web.mac.com/amyantonelli>. It will give you a feel for what life is like on a daily basis of serving at Rising Star Outreach. Or log onto Joyce Hanson's (one of our India Directors) blog at <http://india-walkinginthesand.blogspot.com/>. Discover a bit of the Rising Star Outreach magic on your own computer!

We were distressed to read the U.N. report in July that more than a billion people are now hungry in the world, due to the rising gas and food prices. By May more than 100 million new people had joined the ranks of the hungry poor. It is a challenging time for our world. But we are not helpless to stop the hunger. By pulling together, we can truly make a difference. Rising Star Outreach is trying to do its small part, and we appreciate every sponsor and friend who helps and supports us as we teach others to help themselves. Thanks for all the tremendous support!

Improving English and Literacy at RSO

"If you've come to help me, you can go home again. But if my problems become a matter of your own survival, then perhaps we can work together." This quote, attributed to an Australian aborigine, illustrates the approach volunteers, staff, and donors at Rising Star Outreach (RSO) take when volunteering their time, energy, and resources to improve English and literacy for students at the Peery School for Rising Stars.

One of the missions of Rising Star Outreach is to help individuals reach their full potential. A factor that greatly contributes to this objective is providing an opportunity for education that includes English and literacy training. Literacy in English unlocks doors of opportunity that individuals would not otherwise have the keys to unlock. For this purpose, children of the leprosy colonies are taught English literacy at the Peery School for Rising Stars. Amy Antonelli, Executive Director of RSO, states that the Peery School for Rising Stars has "the mission of teaching the children from the leprosy colonies how to break out of the generational cycle of begging and untouchability. The single greatest factor in determining their ability to do this will be their grasp of English...In the new India, the multinational corporations are uninterested in a person's caste or social standing. They want competent workers. There is a saying in India now that 'education is the new caste.' And the greatest indicator of a good education is how well a person speaks English." To this end, RSO has developed a focus on teaching students, teachers, and staff English and literacy skills.

To fulfill the objective of improving students' level of English and literacy, summer volunteers are working with RSO students one-on-one to teach them English and literacy strategies. Volunteers are employing the Discover Intensive Phonics for Yourself method published by HEC Reading Horizons to improve students' English pronunciation, literacy, and vocabulary skills. Before arriving in India, volunteers completed a four-hour Online Workshop to learn the basic methodology. (See www.phonicstraining.com.) They also attended an in-person or online training to discuss the application of this method in context of working with students at the Peery School.

This methodology was selected to fulfill the students' needs because students have opportunities to improve their pronunciation, increase their vocabulary, and learn strategies for decoding and spelling. In addition, this systematic method is easy to learn and easy to teach, it provides multi-sensory involvement, and a newly-arriving volunteer can pick up where a recently-departed volunteer left off. Also, an important consideration for adopting this method is that the strategies taught develop skills for life-long learning. This method is being used by RSO for the first time this summer and has thus far proven to be very effective. Both the students and volunteers have responded very well to using this method to teach English.

Not only is there a focus on improving the students' English at RSO, but also the teachers' English. For this purpose, a teachers' English class is being offered after school five days a week. The teachers learn pronunciation, grammar, writing, culture, and learning strategies in context of real-life speaking tasks that they encounter outside the classroom. The teachers are very eager to learn English, and they are excellent at applying their learned skills to their interactions outside the classroom. The intention of helping teachers improve their English is to empower them with the confidence and skills necessary to be more effective models of English for their students in the classroom. Until the teachers are able to provide this effective English language modeling, the role of proficient English-speaking volunteers is crucial in assisting in the development of RSO students' English.

There is also a vision to teach English and literacy to staff members at RSO who do not have the skills to communicate in English. Staff members include housemothers, cleaning staff, nurses, drivers, and office staff who all contribute to RSO operations in India. English and literacy training would provide opportunities to learn relevant English vocabulary and phrases that would assist them in their efforts

to communicate with native English speakers who volunteer at RSO, as well as enable them to provide the RSO students with whom they often interact with even more exposure to English, which will ultimately improve students' English.

Efforts to improve English and literacy skills for students, teachers, and staff members contribute to the RSO objective of helping individuals reach their potential. An atmosphere of eager-to-learn students and teachers, combined with the composite efforts of energetic volunteers, dedicated staff and teacher-trainers, and effective methodology that fills unmet needs, creates an effective environment for "work[ing] together" to improve English and literacy skills.

Thiruppani

By Amy Antonelli

All week we've been working in a leprosy colony in Thiruppani trying to get a new community center finished. The colony is three hours away from our land, right in the middle of nowhere. The intention, I imagine, when the colony was originally established, was to relegate them to a place that no one else could use. We've been working in dirt and cement and sand and paint, and the Indian sun did nothing to make it easier for us. Hot, sweaty, and dirty are were my defining characteristics this week. Almost hard to believe I'm still not married.

The colony started doing micro-loans a few years ago with Padma, and they were one of the first to completely give up begging all together. As a way of supporting them in their new businesses, we decided to help them build a place where they could meet, discuss, and plan for their futures.

The hardest part of the job, though, was the attitude of the colonists. They were reserved, distrusting, and skeptical. We hadn't been there with volunteers before, and the leprosy patients were watching closely from a distance to see if these strange American volunteers reacted to them with the usual repulsion they face every day from their own countrymen. So the volunteers went to work without the usual feeling of camaraderie with the colony that usual inspires them, and they were frustrated.

The entire colony has been built on rocks, and it is spectacularly beautiful. I suppose no one wanted the land because it would be impossible to cultivate. But oh, the place is amazing. Each of the little cement homes is built on levels, so in order to get around you literally have to climb the rocks. And all around the rocks are green hills, made lovelier by their



ancient appearance. Sometimes India has a way of blinding her people to her virtues to the point where the filthy cities are considered desirable living locations and a place like Thirippani is tossed away as only fit for lepers.

The tenderest of His mercies.

One day this week we ran out of water in the tank near our work spot, and we had to refill it from an old well in order to continue mixing the concrete. The process of gathering the water consisted of filling a big plastic jug by lowering it about 15 feet and dipping it five or six times, and then yanking it up quickly before too much spills out. Once we had it filled, then we had to figure out how to carry it back. We soon realized that whether the jug rested on our hip, shoulder, or head, carrying it was a difficult and uncomfortable job. It took nine of us about two hours to complete the task. I must have hauled about ten loads, and after each one I was so exhausted I had to sit down and rest for a minute. It was such a simple little job, but it gave me a much deeper insight into the lives that the people here lead, and once again I wondered at my own circumstances of birth. The question of why me, or why them, is unanswerable and persistent.

The rest of the week we worked mixing cement by hand, carrying it in bowls on our heads to each other and then taking turns with trowels slapping it on a brick wall and smoothing it into a plaster. When it dried, finally, we mixed up primer and paint by hand and then we painted the building. Sam made the comment that this was the hardest work she'd ever done in her life, and I believed her. It was hard.

I did some exploring while we were there. Out by the well, we discovered an old building being devoured by the jungle. Long forgotten and completely dilapidated, I fell in love with it. Climbing on the rocks behind our community center, I encountered a family living in a thatched roof lean-to along with their chicken and goats. There was a Hindu temple that was presided over by a traditional priest that played bells and chants the whole

day as we worked. It was really a fascinating place.

There was one commanding moment this week, another sad story to why we do this work. While I was exploring, I ventured into the home of one of the families. It was dark and dank, as most of them are, and in the very back room I discovered an old man who had just been ravaged by the disease. His was one of the worse cases I've seen. It looked like a hurricane had ripped through his body and all that was left was a vague reminder of a face and hands. The family asked me to take a picture of them, and after my camera was ready I motioned to the old man to go get in the picture. When I did, his niece made a grossed out face, pointed to him, and shook her head, stating her desire that he not be included in the picture. In his own family I encountered the visual evidence of the leprosy stigma we spend every day fighting against. I took his picture anyway.

Slowly, as the week went on, the colonists started to warm up. A few of them even came to help us with the job, and the women started to help us with the water. The last day was the best of all. I think by then, they had started to believe that we were genuinely interested in them. They had seen the volunteers leaving every afternoon with cuts and bruises, filthy and exhausted. More than that, they had seen the volunteers' attempts to reach out to them and they had felt their genuine love.

When finally got the job done, the building actually looked pretty good, which was a surprise to all of us, I think. The best part of the week happened right before we left. The patients all gathered around us and started to say thank you by offering to shake our hands. That's a big deal, for someone considered untouchable, to reach out their hand and offer it. It implies a lot of trust, and that trust was earned through a lot of long hours under the hot sun by kids who came thousands of miles to show them that they do matter.

The colony president gave us a little speech, in which he told us that they now felt like we were their brothers and sisters instead of foreigners from a faraway land. They expressed their gratitude for what we had done and they even presented us with a ring of fresh flowers and ice cream for all.

My favorite part, the part that made me cry, was when Meg taught them how to do the signature "I love you" sign that all the Rising Star children always do. The colony members were delighted, and with their broken, curled, missing fingers, they all held their hands up and made the sign as we drove away. In their broken old smiles, and their gnarled old

hands, they told us that they understood, and that they were grateful.

They smiled as they said I love you, and all the hard work was worth it in a single instant. It was a week well spent.

Children Spotlight

Peter. He's the littlest guy in the hostel right now. I don't know much about his family or his short life history so far. I just know he's had it rough since he came to us.

I remember the day after he arrived, sitting in my room at 4:30 am listening to him sobbing from his room in the other hostel across the courtyard. I finally got up and went to go hold him, and when I picked him up his face was so wet with tears I had to dry them with my shirt.

I stood there holding him for a few hours that morning. Every time I started to put him down he started to cry, so I just held on to him until he finally went back to sleep. I tried to imagine being that little, being that alone, and feeling like my parents had just abandoned me. The more I thought about how he must be feeling, the less I wanted to put him down, ever.



Since then, he has slowly gotten better, day by day. It's been hard for him. He rarely smiles, and when he does he seems a little confused by such an abnormal facial movement. Whenever the volunteers ask him questions in English, he just responds "Peter" because he thinks they are all asking him who he is and he wants so badly to be someone. There have been blessings in his life, though, that he

won't know about. Gifts from God that prove how much this child is loved.

Mary Ann Parsons, for example. She came to volunteer with her son for only two weeks. She missed a family reunion to be here and she came a little unsure of why she felt so compelled to come. But she was here, and she was assigned to Peter's "family", and she started reading and singing to him every night before he went to sleep. He loved her. Some nights, after she would put the boys to sleep on their little mats on the floor, Peter would wake up and sneak out of the room, down the stairs, out the front door of their hostel, across the courtyard to the girls hostel, climb up the stairs and come to Mary Ann's room to find her. All of three years old, the child went looking for a mother's love. She would laugh and hold him until he was quiet and peaceful and lovingly take him back to his room.

The truth is that his family didn't abandon him. The truth is that his mother must be in agony right now, because this perfect child is no longer around to bring her the kind of joy he now brings us every day. But she made a sacrifice so that he would have a chance. She made a sacrifice so that perhaps her son would have choices that she never did, and in so doing she becomes one of the bravest people I know.

This morning, as I went busily running from room to room making sure that a thousand balls were being juggled, I heard a little voice quietly call out my name. "Amy?" I heard it just as I was running into the kitchen, so I looked out the kitchen window to see who had called me and saw little Peter, making his trek across the courtyard all by himself.

In spite of all that had to be done immediately, I stopped and went back outside to pick him up. I talked to him for a while and when he said "Peter" I looked him in the eye and said "Peter, I know your name, and I love you." And then he smiled, and his smile was so full of joy that it didn't look unfamiliar at all. He knew what I had said, he felt it. For the moment he understood his value.

Sometimes, in the early mornings, I find myself talking out loud to my own Father, wanting to tell Him my name in case He has forgotten it. It doesn't happen often, but every now and then I get the exact same response that I felt to give Peter this morning. Amy. I know your name, and I love you.

It's enough.