

Daniel Lichman is from the United Kingdom and volunteered at Calcutta Hope's Boys' Home in late 2010. Here he shares his impressions of the Home and his work with the children who live there.

I first went to the SEED Boys' home on a short reconnaissance mission as I navigated the complicated Kolkata NGOs scene trying to work out where I could possibly be of use. Other than just living there with the boys it was hard to see how there would be a role for me in the orphanage. A month later as I got ready to leave the centre of Kolkata where I had been volunteering in the office of another NGO, I experienced serious doubts about whether I should even go – what was the point, I do not speak Bengali, what can I possibly offer them, how can I be useful?

A German volunteer friend who was staying in the same hostel listened to my questions and suggested that I do go and “teach them how to play”. Growing up on the streets and railway platforms of Kolkata, scavenging, working or begging from a young age, these children had been deprived of the right of all children to play. Her words moved me and I realised that I just could not predict what I would be able to give and what the boys in turn would give me during my time there. I got on the bus towards the home in Andul with an open heart and mind.

After a few days there I had managed to find a way to slot into their routine. Each day started at 6am with a short meditation, multi-denominational prayer (Vishnu, Jesus and Muhammad were all hailed) and a stirring rendition of the Indian national anthem. After a biscuit and tea to start the day, the boys got their books out and completed homework or revised the previous week's lessons. The older boys helped the younger and I gave them a hand with any English work. After a couple of hours they congregated together again for the first meal, following which the older boys left to get the bus to school. I stayed behind and then walked with the younger children to the local school and nursery.

They really enjoyed taking ‘uncle’, as all adult men are referred to, along to school to be introduced to their friends and teachers. I managed to persuade one teacher to let me run an English lesson for the whole school. The boys were so proud that I could come to school and teach their favourite game, the hokey kokey, a great way to teach basic English to their friends at school.

Often I would walk with three of the boys to nursery. Laxman and Tarun, (estimated to be between 4 and 5) were the newest residents in the home. They had been found at Howrah station and taken to the home by the railway police. They were really happy, playful children. The third boy, Saddam Ali had a different story. At nine years old, he was attending nursery because after years spent at the station he knew so little. It was such a sad sight to watch Saddam, who had until then been responsibly holding Laxman and Tarun hands as they walked along the road, arriving at the nursery and taking his seat on the floor in the circle of young children half his age and size. I found out that he just needed to learn Bengali and English letters and then he could catch up and join his peers at school. I was determined to help.

Each day the younger boys returned home after a few hours at school and nursery. After a short nap, they followed me to a field around the back of their home and I played with them for a couple of hours. They really exhausted my repertoire of games, always eager to learn more. Stuck in the mud, ninja destruction and duck duck goose, were distinct favourites. It was wonderful to play with them and be able to connect and have fun together without needing to speak the same language. In those moments I was reminded how much children have a wonderful ability to communicate regardless of language.

I was surprised by how much of their time was geared towards studying and schoolwork: next on the daily agenda was another stint of homework and revision. On the first two days I found Saddam Ali sitting with the English or Bengali alphabet in front of him, saying the letters by rote and moving his finger along. Yet when I pointed to one individual letter he could not tell me what it was. So I resolved to spend that time working with him every day.

I started at the beginning with 'A', making a flash card of its lower and upper case. The next day I found out that he enjoyed drawing, and so I got him to work creating a full set of ABC flashcards, complete with a picture of an apple, ball, cow etc. Each day we would make the next set of cards and I organised games that had them running around the room fetching letters and matching them to pictures. They had a great time. I was delighted that Bijoy uncle, their main day to day carer, liked the method so much. He told me that it had not occurred to him that children could learn through games. He assured me that he would try to use these educational games with them in the future.

I was so impressed by Bijoy's leadership of and commitment to the boys under his care. He is the same age as me and basically the father to forty plus boys. He sleeps in the same room as them, will not eat until all of them have and by never favouring one over another, has a magical way of settling any disputes between the boys.

Every two weeks he ran an intensely moving reflective session with the children. He placed a candle in the middle of the circle and after a chant together invited everyone in the circle to share a reflection on how they were feeling. On the two times I saw this ceremony take place, the boys listened attentively and shared some really difficult points, reflecting on their previous lives living rough and being treated badly. Some spoke with tears in their eyes about their friends who were still living that life. These sessions were clearly painful and cathartic for them and a reminder to me that despite the smiles and enjoyment, these children had lead really tough lives.

A key part of the ethos at the Boys Home is that the children make decisions themselves. Each week there was a meeting that Bijoy lead, where all the children are invited to suggest events, make changes to the schedule and join smaller committees to run one-off events. They also discuss misbehaviour and deciding on punishments together.

I later heard, using one of the older children to translate, that Saddam Ali had in fact previously lived in another orphanage. He said that he had not liked it and had twice run away. He told me that what he loved about being in this home was that decisions were made by the boys themselves, he felt empowered there and would never dream of leaving it.

I was lucky to be there when one of the events that they had been planning for weeks took place – the Saraswati puja – the festival to the goddess of knowledge and education. I extended my time in their home so that I could stay for the full festivities. I put my books in the pile with theirs beside the statue of Saraswati that the boys had stayed up all night beautifying. A local Brahmin (priest) came in and invoked her to help all of with our learning.

It was towards the end of the feast of Saraswati that I left the home to continue my travels. By then I had reached the end of the alphabet with Saddam and he knew every letter well; I had also taught the 5 – 8 year olds every game I knew. I had taught many of them to juggle and run educational games at the school. It was a difficult goodbye. I knew that they had really appreciated my presence there and that I had been able to offer them something. I had never anticipated how much I would receive from them. They allowed me to experience a real window into life in West Bengal and what's more, learn about the power of children to overcome and grow beyond abuse, loneliness and

hunger, fighting back to claim their childhood of play, fun and learning. Calcutta Hope through their sponsorship of this Boys' Home allows them to do this.

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