

Creating Hopes and Dreams in Delhi

Dina Schwartzberg followed her dream of working with street children in the developing world during a seven-and-a-half month volunteer assignment with AJWS' Volunteer Corps. Below, Dina reflects on some of her experiences in the slums of Delhi:

Full of hope, I began my volunteer experience with Salaam Baalak Trust (SBT) in India. SBT helps to restore the lives of street children and, in the process, aims to give them back their childhood. SBT has nine “contact points” throughout Delhi that provide approximately 350 street children with food, clothing, medical care, some schooling, and life-skills education. As a nurse I believed that I would be able to help these children live longer and better lives. But nothing – nothing – could have prepared me for what I saw, felt, and experienced when I visited the slums of Delhi on my second day in India.

The contact point I visited in the slums was a three-walled structure with a dirt floor covered by a torn cloth. A large tree grew in a corner and jutted out through the makeshift roof. I was greeted by the sight of semi-naked children's bodies; children so exhausted that they lay on the floor with their limbs intertwined; children unconcerned about the elbows or knees poking into their sides; children ignoring the insects and rats running over and around them.

Upon examination, I discovered that some of these children were suffering from serious illnesses including malaria and tuberculosis. Other children had gaping wounds that were so infected and bug-infested that they seemed incurable. In addition, I discovered that some children had mental health issues and many were addicted to sniffing glue or Wite-Out, the drugs of choice among Delhi's street children. Later, I learned that these children often sold many of the items SBT gave them in order to feed their drug habits.

Suddenly, I felt completely powerless and totally hopeless. What could I do to help change these children's lives? But perhaps more importantly, what – if anything – could I do to empower them to find the will to change their own lives?

Over the next two months every time I visited that contact point that same feeling of hopelessness seemed to reappear above my head like a dark cloud. But then I was asked by SBT's mental health team to plan a workshop for this contact point's children, using my knowledge and experience from nursing school. Unsure as to the best approach, but excited to have the opportunity to work with this particular group of children, I decided to focus the workshop on the children's role models, their hopes, and their dreams for the future.

I spent numerous hours at my desk planning the workshop, yet in the back of my mind I kept asking myself: Why am I doing this? What difference will this really make? Early in February I went to the slums with a translator to conduct the first part of a three-day workshop that I had named the “Hopes and Dreams Workshop.”

The workshop examined the role model concept and offered suggestions for role models

other than local drug dealers and pimps. Together, we began to explore the ideas of hopes and dreams. After spending considerable time observing the children's behavior and understanding their mentality, I was worried that they might be unable to comprehend the idea of a dream for their own future. To my amazement, each child in the group was able to verbalize a dream: *I want to be a flower shop owner. I want to be a ticket collector on the train. I want to be a doctor. I want to be an army officer.* And even more surprising was the fact that they were also able to express the will and the drive to accomplish their dreams.

The last day of the workshop focused on what each child could do to achieve his or her dreams. I sat there, stunned. The children realized that they would need to receive training in order to achieve their desired occupation, and that they would also need to concentrate, focus and give their goals their complete attention. One child raised his hand and said in a barely audible voice: "I need to get off drugs to reach my goal." By the end of the workshop we had a group of 10 boys who committed to becoming drug free together in order to reach their goals. Overall, the results of the workshop were better than anything I could have hoped for.

I walked home with tears of joy in my eyes and promised myself to never again give up hope. These incredible children had taught me that every child has the potential to be great, and that sometimes it just takes a little work, and a little time, for an outsider to see their potential.