

Southern Utah Life; "Haven of Peace": Local sisters teach in India

By BRIAN PASSEY

1662 words

30 August 2009

The Spectrum

bpassey@thespectrum.com

This summer Amy McDonald wanted to go to another country, but she didn't want to "travel."

The St. George native was a sophomore at Brigham Young University in Provo, majoring in journalism with a minor in international development, so she wanted to go somewhere that would give her the chance to do developmental work, not just sightsee.

"I didn't want to go buy magnets for all my friends and take pictures in a red telephone booth," she says. "I didn't want to just have something under my belt."

A BYU hunger banquet - which teaches about the struggles of third world nations through a role-playing exercise - further increased Amy's desire to work in a developing nation.

Then a friend told her about Shanti Bhavan, a home and school for the "most vulnerable and disadvantaged children of India's lowest caste, the so-called untouchables' or dalits."

The best part? Amy had always wanted to travel to India.

"It was just kind of a miracle what a fit Shanti Bhavan was for what I wanted to do," Amy says from her St. George home a few days after returning from three months in India. "I kind of just came up on it almost serendipitously."

During her time in India, Amy recorded many of her experiences through a blog.

June 6. "The last 5 days have been some of the most valuable of my entire life. Living inside of Utah for my entire life has provided the best blank canvas the colors of India have ever seen. And so far, the colors are bright as well as dark. I am baffled by my experiences so far."

Amy's sister Melissa also decided to travel to India and teach at the school. However, Melissa says it was really "Amy's project."

"My parents said she couldn't go by herself," Melissa says.

Melissa was somewhat prepared for living half a world away. She had previously served a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Philippines.

She says many things in India reminded her of the Philippines, including the smell of rice cooking and the "loose observance of traffic laws."

Upon arrival in India the sisters immediately began teaching. Children begin school there at age 4 and remain there until they are finished with high school. Because of this, the McDonald sisters had the opportunity to teach a variety of subjects throughout many of the grades.

June 13. "There is so much I want to write. Every moment here at Shanti Bhavan is worth preserving. ... I am getting used to things here - which is wonderful - but I fear I am losing my sense of wonder and astonishment at it all."

During her six weeks in India, Melissa taught language arts, chemistry and dance. She graduated from the University of Utah in dance but is now beginning medical school at the University of Michigan.

Amy stayed in India twice as long, having the opportunity to teach all but 11th grade. She taught writing and civics, and she continued Melissa's dance classes when her sister went home because the children enjoyed the class so much.

July 19. "Melissa has gone. I talked to her on the phone this morning. What a strange phenomenon, to be in the exact same place I was standing with her, 2 days ago, while talking to her on the phone, half a world away. I miss her tremendously. But being with the kids - who offer their adoration in exchange for a strawberry-shaped eraser - makes it easy to forget my own troubles."

Yet it was the civics class that proved to be most challenging. Although she has a strong interest in American government and politics, Amy had to learn about India's government from scratch and teach the principles to the students, some who were only a few years younger than her.

"My experience in teaching is that you don't necessarily have to know everything," Amy says of how she overcame this challenge. "You just have to give them all the tools to learn it for themselves."

Melissa says the nature of the program - with new teachers coming and going every few months - can create challenges but the children are accustomed to it. Yet she also realizes the chance for an education like this is something these "untouchable" children would otherwise never have.

She says the children also have the opportunity to be exposed to a large variety of people and ideas.

June 21. "The kids are so wonderful, and ask about you - my family, friends, old teachers, strangers, anything at home - all the time. They are amazed at my "torch" (flashlight) and

want to know "how we should press it?" That gives you an idea of their innocence. Although they all started singing 'What Time Is It?' from HSM 2 to me the other day."

One thing both sisters mention is the unconditional love they shared with the children.

"They're just sweet," Melissa says. "They always had a smile for you."

"They just love you unconditionally," Amy says. "And they're so funny. And they're so talented."

Amy relates a story in her blog about some teachers from Great Britain who came to learn from the education model at Shanti Bhavan. During the visit, some of the older students performed five vignettes showing what their lives are like when they are not at the school. The students later asked Amy why the British teachers cried.

Aug. 1. "I continued to tell the 10th graders that one reason why people are so touched' is because when they meet them, they feel the need to change. If I leave them the same person I was when I came, I will have failed myself."

Melissa says the school sheltered them somewhat from the culture shock of a third world country.

"It's kind of a little culture within a culture," she says. "It's kind of its own little world."

They had hot showers and flushing toilets. They were able to go out on weekends and visit nearby towns.

Yet both sisters quickly gloss over the things they saw in India. For them it was about what they felt.

"Most days I would go to breakfast and think, This is the way life should be lived," Amy says. "I didn't have a phone and I didn't have the Internet. I just had 200 kids looking at me, and my journal and my camera. I would say I did more good in those three months than I did the rest of my life. And I didn't have to be on Facebook for that."

July 7. "Although I am missing the days when I could hop on my MacBook and document every last thought with cyber space, I am cherishing the moments I have here - trying to sum up all the happiness I have felt in nearly every moment I live through at Shanti Bhavan."

Amy says Shanti Bhavan means "Haven of Peace." It's true, she says, it's the most peaceful place she's even been.

"There's this incredible energy there," Amy says. "You can almost physically feel it."

Part of that energy comes from the mission of Shanti Bhavan, which is to "fully develop the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children of India's lowest caste." The school seeks to help these children aspire to careers and professions of their choice.

The children do not take it for granted, Amy says. They study all the time.

"They are expected to save their families, if not their entire village," she says. "Every single one of their families is dependent on them."

Aug. 16. "I leave in 4 days. On August 20 - my 20th birthday. How everything will turn out I don't know. At this moment, I feel like my life has a big question mark attached to it. And most of the questions are coming from the kids. Why didn't we have dance class yesterday? Why are you leaving? When are you coming back?"

Although the teachers at Shanti Bhavan are constantly coming and going, some of the people associated with the school remain constant, like founder Abraham George.

"He's a man with the weight of the world on his shoulder," Amy says of George.

A former captain in the Indian Army, George eventually migrated to the United States, where he obtained master's and doctorate degrees in business and financial disciplines. He is currently the chairman of a medical diagnostic software company in the United States but returns often to India to work with several humanitarian projects, including Shanti Bhavan.

In June, George and all the volunteer teachers will see the fruits of their efforts as Shanti Bhavan graduates its first class. The first set of children who came to the school as 5-year-olds have made it to the 12th grade.

Yet Amy says the school still needs all the help it can get, including volunteers and monetary donations. Those interested can find out more at www.shantibhavanonline.com.

To read more about Melissa and Amy's experiences at Shanti Bhavan, visit Amy's blog at amymcdonald.blogspot.com.

Aug. 25. "I am back in the U.S.A. and everything is too normal. 36 hours of flying by yourself is not the best way to spend the day after you leave the 200 most adorable and loving people in the world. ... I hate that I am forgetting them and they are me. But they are still there. They are still learning, still healthy, still living without me. And that thought makes me happy."

For more information on Shanti Bhavan visit www.shantibhavanonline.com.

To read Amy McDonald's blog, go to amymcdonald.blogspot.com.