

Letter to the Editor

A Meadow of Sunshine

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Dear Sir,

“80-120 hours of community work”, the daunting words announced in class echoed in my mind as I walked back home at the end of another loaded day. I understood the idea behind it and the benefits, no doubt. But every time I thought back to those words I thought ‘How?’. How was this going to be possible? Juggling theory lectures, practical’s, countless seminars and college fests, tests. So many things to do ‘How??’ the word reverberated again like the ticking of the seconds hand on the watch reminding me that time was running out. I had to get this going; there was no two ways about it.

I tagged along with a friend to volunteer at ADAPT. That was the first time I actually heard about the NGO and I was sceptical, after all I had zero experience and just textbook knowledge about...and in all the horror of it, I had never even heard of ADAPT or what it was about. ‘What am I doing?!’ I mentally slapped myself at the back of my head. I feared causing more damage than good. In all the thinking and over thinking I didn’t realise when we had gotten there and when I got accepted as a volunteer. ‘We’ll be coming Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for 2 hours per day after our lectures,’ the voice of my classmate brought me back into the scene. ‘This is how’, I mentally answered the biggest question mark that had made it home in my head these last couple of months.

As soon as I got home that afternoon, I did what I should’ve done early. I types in ‘ADAPT’ on our ever vast virtual realm and read up everything I possibly could. ‘ADAPT- Able Disable All People Together, formerly known as The Spastics Society of India, is a highly active and encouraging NGO working for Neuro-Muscular and Development Disabilities. One of India’s most noted NGO, it was started on 2nd October 1972 by Mithu Alur, to provide treatment and education services for the spastics i.e children suffering from cerebral palsy. Cerebral Palsy are set of permanent movement disorders that appear in early childhood. The symptoms include muscle stiffness, swallowing, hearing, vision etc.’

I thought back to the eye catching sunshine yellow building adjacent to Bandra Reclamation. Spacious and hygienic, with big classrooms and also a quite calm garden right in the centre of the building, ADAPT didn’t seem so daunting anymore. On my first day volunteering I entered with uncertainty, but then something overcame that. The air was fresh with laughter and carefree happiness and warm encouragement. There was crying, jokes, rolling on the floor and mocking, all nostalgia of preschool. The children were bundles of hope just like all the other children of the world, and now I was going to be a part of their growth.

I was given a class of 11 students out of which only 11 were present. My first task was to read to my class. So after a very formal and highly awkward introduction, I pulled book from the shelf and began reading. As I start reading I realized none of them were paying attention to the story or me. I could feel what I feared the most- resistance. I wasn’t surprised, I mean these children must have gone through years of rejection, mocking and social stigma from people they know, so how could they accept someone from outside their comfort zone? Though I was extremely discouraged, I still tried breaking the barriers but things didn’t seem to work. They wouldn’t allow me to paint with them, feed them or even touch their books. So I used some of my textbook knowledge- humour. Cracking jokes,

making funny faces and noises and sometimes even weirdly dancing, I soon saw the barriers melt away. They then started to anticipate my arrival with some new stories and games. Within two weeks, I had made 11 new friends. They had finally accepted me.

Soon everything settled into a beautiful routine. There were days when I taught them their maths or science and days when all we did was learn something new about each other. I also noticed that there was no place for sympathy and ignorance of mistakes in the NGO. Teachers were loving and kind but stern. Nobody not even the peons would flinch before yelling at them for their mistakes. They were treated as normal kids by the use of punishments and rewards. There one can also see kids basic behaviour such as jealousy, tantrums, mood swings etc. the children were also very interactive when it came to give ideas for projects, craft and arts. Each child had their areas of forte where some were great in dancing, while some others had amazing voice and yet others were good in painting.

I must confess I had to remind myself that I was underestimating them multiple times. After all, there was nothing these kids were not capable of !. In all ADAPT was a life changing experience. I found a magic and strength support and unconditional love and acceptance. I feel honoured that these amazing children allowed me the chance to witness them transform, their conditions improve and their astonishing capabilities !

I can say I have now seen a human strength I thought only existed in movies like Taare Zameen Par. Though there were times the staff were at the ends of their patience, I've always seen them stand by the each child like a wall, never once showing annoyance or disregard for the children. I see ADAPT and other NGOs like it as a beacon that highlight a need for psychology and special education. Without these, children would have been left all by themselves to deal with the consequences of their disabilities. The NGO not only help children stand on their own feet and have their own shadows but also change the way people see these disorders as. They put them in a positive life encouraging people to change their perceptions. This is a need of the hour in a time when the world seems to be one big battle ground, the hope and strength these children and organizations symbolize and personify is a meadow of sunshine.