

NEWSLETTER

FreeSchools

WORLD LITERACY

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Welcome to FreeSchools World Literacy — AUS Newsletter!

It has been a while since we have sent out a newsletter and we wanted to update all our generous donors and supporters on *FreeSchools*' activities and progress. Currently, we have 74 *FreeSchools* World Literacy funded centres in India, Bangladesh and Thailand with 87 on staff teaching over 3000 students. The students are being taught the basics—reading, writing, arithmetic, health issues, civic awareness and crafts and other income generating skills such as sewing. The purpose of *FreeSchools* World Literacy is to provide free education in order to break the cycle of ignorance and poverty that leaves millions in hopeless despair. The organisation provides free literacy programs; teacher employment and training; income producing skills; health education; food and clothing and is documenting changes in the wellbeing of the community as a result of its programs. By providing ongoing funds and scholarships for the existing and planned new schools; *FreeSchools* World Literacy hopes to replicate its model throughout India, Thailand and other Developing Countries of the World.

We do this with the help of our overseas field partners: Sister Crescence and the Fakirana Sisters Society in Bihar State, India; Rev. Ashish Amos and ISPCK in New Delhi; Amarak in Bangladesh and the Mirror Foundation in Thailand. Thanks to their continuing selfless work we are seeing the real benefits of this education flow back in the local community.



Buildings and grounds of the Sacred Hearts Convent.

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**THE AFFORDABLE GIFT THAT
CHANGES A GIRL'S LIFE!**

Impressions of India

Dawn begins as a filthy yellow smudge on the horizon, slowly growing in intensity as I watch from the window of our India Rail carriage. The other two Presidents of *FreeSchools* World Literacy, Sue Tennant from Canada and Geri Johnson from the United States, and my daughter Francheska, are still asleep as we make the 17 hour train journey from India's capital, Delhi, to the town of Bettiah in the heart of India's poorest State, Bihar.

The smudge intensifies, the dry brown of the land lightening, bleeding into an oily brown sky around the horizon, the dust and pollution obscuring the brilliance

of the orb itself, smothering it into a nondescript flatness.

Sunrise in this part of the world is never a particularly pretty event—this morning it is exactly the same as I remember it from the morning 16 years ago in February 2000 when I made the same train journey with humanitarian Mark Bloomfield. It is as if the sun itself has adjusted, toning its grandeur to match the dreary and backbreaking drudgery experienced by the countless peasants and their families living and toiling on the land, thousands upon thousands of endless scenes of poverty; snapshots fleetingly caught in the picture windows of the train carriage as it rattled nonchalantly along the track.

Like the daily sunrise, the peasant's cycle, too, is endless, for as long as they are able to keep it up, matching the sun for a while, toiling strong and valiantly in their fields upon the bones of their forefathers, the routine broken only by a rare event—a marriage, the birth of a child, a religious holiday, a death—matching the sun for, perhaps, three score and ten if they are lucky, or else falling early—succumbing to natural causes; disease, malnutrition or even simple infection.

The sun rises higher, defining itself, separating the landscape into light and shade as acrid smoke from breakfast campfires curls into the thickening atmosphere, fires fuelled by wood, cow dung or discarded tyres, whatever the women can lay their hands on to cook for their families.

Only about 28 people make the train journey in the relatively comfortable 4-berth cabins of the first class car under the watchful eye of the conductor—we allowed ourselves that small luxury, booking weeks in advance to be able to do so—but by far the majority travel in second class, or worse, crammed into the smelly, barred, open-widowed carriages of cattle class. The gamble paid off for some of us westerners though, as we nursed our exhausted frames, ravaged by the effects 'Delhi belly', to and from the carriage toilet throughout the wee hours.

Waiting on Bettiah platform, in the



Ella shows Francheska and Sue a colourful patchwork quilt made in the Women's Empowerment Centre where income-earning skills are taught.

morning's relative cool, our in-country partner, the nearly-blind Sister Mary Crescence of the Sacred Hearts Sister's Society, was there to greet us, her assistants eagerly grabbing our bags and shuffling us towards the waiting 4-wheel drive for the short journey to the convent.

Under the mid-morning sun the heat intensifies. Straight above the sky is cloudless, but only the palest hint brownish-blue is visible even on the best days. Noon and beyond the heat builds unbearably to an oppressive crescendo—reaching its energy-sapping zenith just before the monsoon with temperatures

soaring into the high forties, and from whence spread the old adage that only 'mad dogs and Englishmen' would be foolish enough to go out into it. The sensible ones soon learnt the only way was to sit it out on the verandah sipping a gin and tonic.

After the heat, the streets of Delhi and the rigours of the train journey, the tranquil grounds of the Convent of the Sacred Hearts Sisters stood before us like an oasis in the desert, its two giant imperial palms standing silent sentinel on either side of the entrance gate ushering us into the welcoming grounds. Gaily coloured flowerbeds and hedges adorned the front of the imposing two-story sky-blue convent building where everyone was waiting.

The live-in primary and secondary Bridge Course girls swept around us eagerly in waves, regrouping and spreading with the fluidity of a school of fish—particularly enthralled by Francheska who, being fresh out of school, was closer to their age. They gathered in front of us in rehearsed formation, throwing garlands of flowers around our necks, and singing the 'Hearty Welcome' song with verses both in Hindi and English.

Our aim was to visit some of the world's poorest schools—schools for children on the absolute bottom rung of society's ladder, schools in the poorest of villages accessible only by dirt track, schools sometimes without even a classroom and perhaps only a tarpaulin stretched between the trees to shade the children from the ravages of the sun—but they were functioning schools none-the-less. They were our Free Schools and we were proud of them, supported through the generosity of hundreds of our donors living comfortably in Australia, Canada and the US, each willing to do their little bit to make these poor children's lives better.

Things had come a long way since Mark and I visited Sister Crescence's very first school in the year 2000. To see her warm welcoming face once again, and in such good health and spirits after all these years, was a wonderful feeling—it was as if no time at all had passed between us, and I, for one, was raring to see the schools, the students and the progress that she had been making.

But first on Sister Crescence's list for us westerners was lunch in the dining hall with the other Sisters followed by a prescribed afternoon of rest in our chambers. With the help of the Bridge girls, our rooms had been prepared for us;

freshly painted windows decked out with flyscreens, beds with mosquito netting, air conditioning fans, plus an ensuite shower and toilet with towels and soap, and a printed itinerary hung on the wall above our desk and chair outlining our program of activities: A mighty effort made by those whose own rooms were significantly more Spartan than our own.

From the windows of our quarters, daily scenes in the convent grounds played



out before us, the sisters and their staff tending the sun dappled gardens, tilling and irrigating small plots of garlic plants, beans, pumpkins and corn amongst the shady plantations of mango, jackfruit and guava trees—complete with a cow out back supplying the convent's dairy needs. The new Bridge Course dormitory building and classrooms, built and supported by *FreeSchools World Literacy* through the efforts of Saskia Raevouri, stood proudly alongside the dining hall. The girls took Francheska aside, guest of honour, into their dorm where, sitting on their sleeping mats all lined up in a row against the wall, they laughed, wrote notes in each other's diaries, and told stories.

Elsewhere on the huge acreage controlled by the Catholic Church, we were shown other gated grounds and fine buildings similar to those of the convent, including various chapels, the Sacred Hearts Convent School, a school for the deaf and blind, the novitiates school, and a public infirmary/women's health and birth clinic.

Donations to *FreeSchools World Literacy* go directly to the schools with no losses along the way, the exchange rate ensuring that every precious foreign dollar has maximum purchasing power in India. The way it works is that our donors' funds are used to pay teacher's salaries—each teacher being in charge of a class of 25-30 students—and this means it costs us approximately \$20 per child per year to ensure they receive an education - that life changing education every child



Students and their teachers take a break from their lessons to pose for a photo in front of the Ellen White Free School.

in this world deserves. The free schools are secular and all are welcome, although in any circumstance where a choice must be made, preference is given to girls in order to counter the gender disadvantage they already suffer, particularly among the lower castes. And, to the keenest and brightest of our students, we offer scholarships (worth about \$120 to \$180 per annum) enabling these lucky ones to continue on to college and even university studies. The bottom line; educated women typically manage their lives better, starting their families later and having fewer and better educated children. It gave me great pleasure to meet one of these former students, Nancy Vincent, who our family had been supporting, with her scholarship going towards medical text books. Nancy now lectures in Nursing at the university. Her proud parents came to the convent, laden with albums full of graduation photos, and her younger sister too - she had been pen pal with my own daughter over the years.

There were many touching moments during our school visits over the following few days, teachers and students alike dressing in their finest, and most likely their one and only good set of, clothes for the benefit of the foreign visitors, a feast of bright colours, but for me there were two highlights: In one school, the young teacher, Prince, was teaching in the front yard of his parents' home, reading to the class from a colourful picture book (which we obtain for a few cents a copy from Pranthum a not-for-profit publisher). It was a typically oppressive afternoon when we arrived; the children sat cross-legged on the ground under a tarp, heads swivelling to follow us as we took our designated places in a row of plastic chairs. At the end of the lesson we spoke briefly on the benefit of education, our words of inspiration, translated by Sister Crescence, being 'that only the sky is the limit' for those lucky enough to get the

opportunity to learn. Upon congratulating the teacher, I discovered that 'Prince' had been one of our original free evening school students, one of those who I saw as a child, who had now returned, driven by a desire to repay the kindness and opportunity shown to him, to share his knowledge with the next generation—giving back to the community to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.

On another day we visited a newly-built two-classroom school packed with primary age children, who at the end of our visit, obediently filed outside for a group photo, standing proudly in front of their school. It was called the "Ellen White School", because one of our supporters decided that her own house in the United States would be sold when she passed away, and the proceeds used to build a school in India. A bricks and mortar school meant that the poor children of that lucky village, come monsoon, storm or blinding heat, would always have a permanent place to learn. The brass plaque to be mounted beside the school's front door was still being engraved at the time of our visit.

Back in Delhi, we met with another of



Some of the teachers are young enough to be students.



our in-country partners, Dr Ashish Amos and Ella Sonawane of the ISPCCK. Here we learned that our Ghaziabad Free School was filled to capacity, bursting at the seams with children eager to take advantage of the high quality educational programs being offered there, and that plans were afoot to secure inexpensive land on the outskirts of the city to build a much bigger school to meet the growing demand. The original Ghaziabad buildings could then be used as an empowerment centre where women, often the mothers of the *FreeSchools* students could learn tailoring and other skills, enabling them to run their own small businesses. Ashish and Ella were anxious to know if our supporters might like their idea and we were able to reassure them that a bricks and mortar project would always have a great appeal—being something tangible, something real that would go on being useful for decades and decades to come, something that donors could know, as Ellen White did, would be around serving humanity long after they were no longer. Apparently our *FreeSchools* programs at Ghaziabad were so popular that even middle class families in the neighbourhood were asking if they could pay for their children to attend, and this revelation threw up a whole raft of new ideas for growing in-country funding for some future projects.



Bridge Course girls on their sleeping mats in the dormitory.

Ella was also keen to have volunteers come to work in the schools, teaching the children in the mornings, and the women in the afternoons; English, drama, music, computing or any other skills that might be useful. After hosting a young volunteer from England to stay in her family home and work at Ghaziabad, Ella felt that such visitors were a great inspiration to the *FreeSchools* students encouraging them to believe that for them anything was now possible.

In the closing days of our Indian visit, my daughter Francheska gazed over the silhouetted marble domes of the Taj Mahal from the rooftop of our nearby hotel. Mesmerized by the scene, she reached for her camera.

“Look dad, how wonderful! The full moon is rising over the Taj Mahal.”

I’d allocated a few extra days to take her to see the Taj Mahal - truly one of the world’s greatest seven wonders—I wanted her to see what the Indian people were really capable of creating - the magnificence of their real culture beyond her limited view of Old Delhi’s crumbling buildings, tangles of live electrical wiring hanging low into narrow filthy streets crowded with beggars, aggressive vendors and horn-blaring motorcycles—the crushing population densities reaching Armageddon levels. As lucky westerners, we’d had a pleasant day getting to the town of Agra in the air conditioned comfort of Mr Singh’s taxi, relaxed by his easy, safe driving on the open highway.

I hadn’t seen the Taj myself, having missed that opportunity 16 years earlier when, by chance, Mark Bloomfield and I happened across Dr Amos at the 2000 New Delhi World Book Fair—we had far more important things to talk about back then than our sightseeing plans! It is amazing where a chance meeting can lead.

“That’s the sun, Francheska,” I replied. “See, the moon’s up there,” I added, pointing straight up at the silvery half-orb in the darkening sky over our heads.

“I’ve never been able to look straight into the sun like this before,” she exclaimed, adjusting her camera, concentrating on the shot. “Why is it like that?”

“The sun’s rays have to pass through a lot of atmosphere at this time of afternoon—it dulls them right down, and the atmosphere in this part of the world is particularly thick.”

I didn’t want to spoil her moment with additional detail about the thick brown blanket of exhaust and dust pollution trapped behind the massive wall of the Himalaya range, smothering the entire northern half of the Indian continent. After a while you start to get used to it, I mused—even forget that it is there—apart from that nagging little cough every now and then.

“Have you noticed how we’re never getting sunburnt here?” I added, but Francheska was already lost in her own thoughts. I’d already given her enough. She focused on the framing, the angle and best zoom.

“Look at this one dad,” she turned the back of her camera toward me, arrowing through several shots to get to the one she liked best. “Just great isn’t it?” At that



The next generation of students are given a science lesson by former *FreeSchools* student, Prince, under a tarpaulin in the front yard of his parents home.

moment Francheska was at peace with India, and, therefore, so was her dad.

“Fabulous!” I exclaimed, screwing up my eyes to take in the thumbnail-sized image. “Just wait until you see the ones you’re going to take tomorrow morning. Gates open at five forty five and we’re gonna be the first ones in there.”

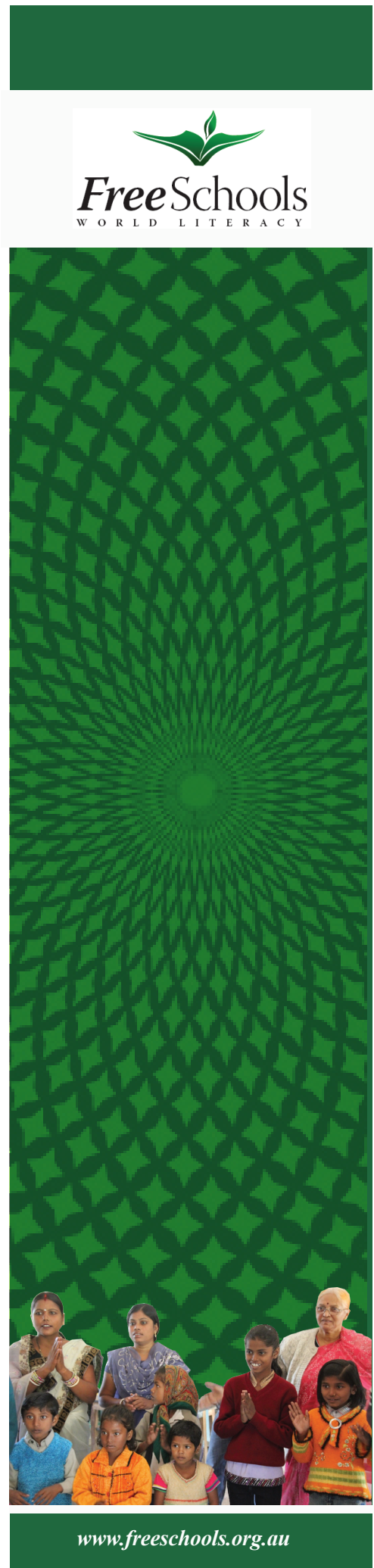
Special Thanks

I would like to thank the *FreeSchools* World Literacy Committee, many of which have been members since the Committee’s inception for their tireless and ongoing support.

And, finally a special mention to Vern Verass of Design Direction for helping with the design and production of this newsletter.

The rewards of literacy

- Literacy empowers girls with income-producing skills
It keeps them from early marriage and reduces birth and infant mortality rates.
- When able to read and write, add and subtract girls are less likely to be cheated, sold into bonded labor or tricked into human trafficking.
- The study of Health and Hygiene helps protect against HIV AIDS.
- Literacy finds expression in music, dance, drama and humor—liberating natural talents that have been submerged for generations.
- The brightest are scholarshiped into formal schools and will become leaders.
- Village women initially partner with *FreeSchools*, but the whole village discovers the benefits of cooperation and grassroots democracy.
- *FreeSchools* demonstrates caring respect for the individual and has no religious discrimination.



Yes I would like to support *FreeSchools* or sponsor a student

Please find enclosed my gift of:

\$ (your choice) to support the operations of *FreeSchools*

\$ 20 to support a child to attend a *FreeSchool* in India

\$ 120 to provide a scholarship for one student to attend regular school for a year

There are two methods to make your donation.

1. You can pay by cheque

My cheque is enclosed and crossed “Not Negotiable” and made payable to *FreeSchools* World Literacy

or

2. You can make a deposit directly into the *FreeSchools* Westpac bank account

Account name: *FreeSchools* World Literacy Inc.

Account BSB: 032 196

Account Number: 266 690.

or

You might like to set up a regular small monthly donation.

Please complete your contact details below.

Name Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss/Dr:

Name of supporting organization (if applicable):

Address:

State: Postcode:

Telephone: Email:

Send your donation to:

FreeSchools World Literacy—Australia

Attn: Dr. Robert Coenraads—President

8 Trigalana Place, Frenchs Forest, New South Wales 2086.

More information

For more information and photos, please see our website <http://www.freeschools.org>.
 You can contact the President directly—Robert Coenraads (02) 9451 8496 or email the Editor, Robert Coenraads, at coenraads01@optusnet.com.au Or perhaps you might like one of us to give a presentation about *FreeSchools* to your group or organization.



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