

The Venkatraman Memorial Trust

newsletter



May 2011

The Venkatraman Memorial Trust, known as the Venkat Trust, was set up in 2004 in memory of Venkat, a boy whose education was sponsored by trustee Sylvia Holder, and who sadly was killed in a road accident at the age of 27. It provides and improves educational facilities for school children in the poor fishing village of Kovalam in Tamil Nadu, South India.

Every penny donated goes to the Venkat Trust. All UK costs are met by the trustees.

Update from Sylvia Holder, Founder Trustee

The High School Saga



Praise the Lord, Allah and Shiva – that should just about cover the spiritual beliefs of the people of Kovalam – we have finally had the go-ahead to build our high school. Our team there - JR, Jude and Ali - worked tirelessly, I was on the trail again in January, and finally I received the text I'd so long been waiting for. It was written surreptitiously by JR in the Revenue Secretary's office before the ink of his signature was even dry!

Alas, total euphoria was rather short lived when we were told that projects with any Government connection had to stop until the Tamil Nadu election on 15 April, presumably to prevent any bribery by the candidates. Now there's a further delay until the results are announced later this month... But we are on our way and we expect to have the school built by January next year.

Blessing of the Earth



We have at least been able to bless the earth, on which the school will be built, in Hindu tradition with the Bhoomi Puja ceremony. (Bhoomi means earth, Puja is an act of worship). The ritual is performed to inaugurate a new construction site. According to Hindu beliefs and culture, the earth is considered to be a mother so the ritual is to propitiate the good energy and natural elements surrounding the site.



JR hands the first brick to the chief mason



The bricks are placed in a hole and water poured on

It is also to seek forgiveness as the construction will mean killing worms and other species. A hole is dug for nine bricks which are sprinkled with turmeric, kumkum dots and mango leaves. The priest or chief mason offers incense to the bricks which are half covered in water to create an altar onto which rice and flowers are scattered. The bricks will be used in the construction of the school to bring it success.



Rice and flowers are sprinkled on the altar

A sponsor's story



Mary Ann Prior is a long time supporter of VMT and at present lives in Oklahoma City where she is Executive Director of the City Arts Center. Excerpts of an article she wrote for The Oklahoman are reproduced below, by kind permission of Mary Ann and The Oklahoman.

I am a passionate believer in the power of education to transform lives and take people out of poverty. That is why, some years ago, I started sponsoring two children from Kovalam.

It was not a spur of the moment decision: the tsunami of 2006 prompted my action. So many orphaned, so many homeless, so much devastation and destruction, it was impossible for me to be an armchair sympathiser. I had to do something. But what can any one person do? Give money? My cynicism about charitable funds reaching victims of catastrophes held me back.



Mary Ann with Sadis, family and friends

I floundered in a state of frustrated compassion until a friend told me about the Venkat Trust.

I became one of the original sponsors, paying for two children. I chose the very impoverished, delightful, angelic Durga and the even more desperately poor but obviously intelligent Sadis. I based my decision on their need and, seeing their photographs, my instinct.

Last year, I went to India on a research trip and made a point of ending my trip in Kovalam so I could meet “my” children and Sylvia, whose stay coincided with mine.

I was given a tour of the village and taken to visit the children. It was lovely to meet the three little people in whom I've invested hope as well as money, and so moving to see the — to Western eyes — squalid, miserable conditions they live in.

Yet, incredibly, every day all the sponsored children manage to go to school, wearing their uniforms with pride. They look every bit as elegant as the pupils of any high achieving school in this country. But beyond superficial appearances, the comparison ends abruptly, for these young Kovalam kids have nothing except innate optimism and the charity of others on which to rely for their futures.



Mary Ann with her daughter's sponsored child, Kanimulzi, and mother.

Durga and Sadis were shy, well-mannered and dignified in my presence; it is humbling to witness their obvious cheerful dispositions overcoming adversity. Their polite answers to my questions failed to elicit much of their true personalities, but they nevertheless became real to me, as I did to them, and that encourages us all. Sponsors such as me take a gamble; not every child is going to be a doctor, lawyer or nuclear physicist, but education goes a long way toward improving self-esteem, and I would recommend giving help as a reward in itself.

More sponsors still needed



We had a brilliant response to our appeal for more sponsors in our last Newsletter. Thanks to you, our numbers have grown from 138 to 154. I am now preaching to the converted as most of the response came from our existing supporters who have taken on additional children or already help us in other ways. However, there are still a lot of needy children in Kovalam and therefore I am appealing to you again, not to dig ever deeper into *your* pockets, but to spread the word among family, friends and neighbours. The cost is now £12 a month, £7 of which is given to the child's family each month and £5 goes into a savings account for the more expensive years of education ahead.

Here are some of the children desperate for help. Their fathers earn about £11 a month.



Aravind is 6. His father earns his living as a coolie (odd job man) and his mother is dead. His grandmother lives with them in a leaf house. Aravind likes to play cricket.



Indhira is 8 and she lives with her father who is a dhobi (washerman), mother, brother and sister in a leaf house. Her ambition is to be a teacher.

Six year old Logesh lives with his mother and father, a watchman, in a leaf house. He would like to be a policeman when he grows up.



Progress Report



You may think (with some justification) that we are totally pre-occupied with the high school and sponsorship but in fact we are as busy as ever with all our other projects. The Panchayat school has been a great success story – from its bottom-of-the-pile rating to a much sought after school. It now has excellent teachers, several of whom are financed by us, and we supply uniforms, shoes, text books and stationery to every child. This is not only a huge help to the parents but gives the school a status it lacked before. Attendance is high and results are good.

Thanks to the numerous new buildings we have put up, overcrowding is a thing of the past and all the children enjoy sport as part of their daily curriculum at the VMT Sports Ground. We continue to help St Joseph's School by paying fees for 200 pupils and sponsoring four university scholarships each year.

All this has been achieved thanks to you. We are very grateful to all our generous and loyal supporters, without whom none of this would have been possible.

High School Shopping List



The begging bowl is out yet again though happily, thanks to all the donations we have had over the past couple of years, we have the money - with some help from the Government - for the building itself and most of the furniture. Our shopping list ranges from a classroom sign for a tenner to a complete classroom in the name of your choice for £4,000.

Most of our needs now are for the large school grounds - we need a perimeter wall at £30 for each five foot, a wrought iron entrance gate for £450, £20 contributions for the turfing and planting of the garden area or £25 for a five foot palm tree. Donations of £30 towards the cost of laying the sports area and the equipment needed for cricket, volleyball, badminton etc. are also needed. Any amount for any item will be very much appreciated.

Sunday Fun in Kovalam



In January I spent a happy Sunday afternoon with all the sponsored children and their parents. The programme included dancing displays, an art competition prize giving and an opportunity for families to discuss with me any problems they had with their children's education. The afternoon finished with hilarious tugs of war at the Venkat Trust sports ground between the mothers and fathers and the boys and girls (fair as the fair sex outweighed the opposition). No one won as the rope broke in both contests! A very happy day was had by one and all.



The future generation of Team Kovalam? The young spectators are, from left to right, JR's daughter Dhanuja, Ali's girls Sumaya and Nafila and Jude's daughter Jane Marvel.



Our thanks go to Haines & Co, Hove, for preparing the annual accounts for the Charity Commission and John Sargent of sitewriters.co.uk for our website. Our Newsletter designer, Georgina Dunn, is busy finishing off her degree but will be back for the next issue.

The Venkatraman Memorial Trust is a registered charity, No. 1104363

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