

NEWSLETTER FROM MURIEL THOMSON - 2010



Working with the St. Joseph's Social Service Centre, Chennai, India

Latest news on my Indian Project - March 2010

Hello,

Another year has flashed past and here I am again having just returned from my annual visit to the St. Joseph's Social Service Centre in India. I feel very blessed to have had the opportunity to once more go back to India to see the children who have very much become like my own family. I have so many happy and loving memories of my visit that I will cherish for years to come. This newsletter will update you on the progress of the project which I set up four years ago. Initially it was to raise funds to educate only Antony



but you will see how the project has grown and how life has improved in many ways for the children of the St. Joseph's Centre and those from the poor neighbourhood area. As well as the 30 children living in the Centre around 90 children under the age of five are still given Day Care in the Centre 6 days a week. They are taken care of while their mothers are out working, many barely earning enough to survive on. There were some changes at the St. Joseph's Centre – three of the live in children have left and been rehabilitated back with relatives in other parts of South India and some new children have taken their place with the Centre now becoming their home. Sadly the three who have left are children who had been there since my first visit back in 2006 – I will miss not being able to see them growing up any more but hope to be able to receive news of how they are getting on. Great praise must go to Sister Bakkiam who runs the Centre, the other Sisters and the workers of the St. Joseph's Centre for their dedicated work in bringing up the children in a very happy home. I take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to everyone who has supported this project over the last four years. It is thanks to your generous support that the future looks brighter for some children in a small corner of India. I will be continuing my fund raising talks during 2010 to secure the children's future education, give them the security of a refuge in the St Joseph's Centre and to improve the health care and well being of some of the children of the neighbourhood. May God Bless everyone at the St. Joseph's Centre and those of the neighbourhood area and keep them safe and healthy. Please can you remember them all in your thoughts and prayers.

The home visits touch my heart.



It is always a privilege and a pleasure for me to be able to visit the children of the neighbourhood in their homes. It is lovely to have the chance to meet the families and the children usually do a dance, sing a song or do some reading. However my visits to the neighbourhood continue to be a real eye opener when I see many people still living in one room, thatched roofed homes with no running water or toilet facilities. After some recent flooding many of the homes in the neighbourhood had been surrounded in stagnant water for weeks. This as you can imagine is a real health hazard – when flooding occurs all the flood water rushes into the open sewers, overflowing them and flooding the area with sewage. This time I visited 15 children in their homes including a lovely visit to young Abdul's house. Abdul is one of

the boys who through this project are receiving an English education at Montfort School. I have a particular soft spot for Abdul having seen him grow up from a baby on my first visit back in 2006. Abdul lives in a small thatched roofed

home with his mother, father, younger brother and grandfather. His grandfather who speaks English is such a sweet man and so enthusiastic about helping Abdul with his education. We have advised his grandfather to read as much as he can to Abdul and for them to make use of the books in the library which has been set up at the St. Joseph's Centre. It was very touching to be able to witness the loving bond between grandfather and grandson.

23 children now being educated in English at Montfort school.



It was decided to move the 6 children we had on the English Education Programme at Marian School to be with the other children at Montfort School. Using two schools was causing a number of problems and things should now be a lot easier to manage for both Sister Bakkiam at St. Joseph's Centre and myself. I have direct contact with Montfort School which means I can keep in touch when I am back in Scotland and iron out any problems that might occur. Naturally the children will take a little time to settle into their new school but we are confident that they are young enough to do so. All 6 children are excited to be joining the other children at Montfort in June. Hebciba the young 6 year old, now in her third year at Montfort School continues to do extremely well getting A+ grades. She is understanding English very well and speaking it with ease. Britto who is now 7 years old started at Montfort School last year having done his first year in a Tamil medium school and he is now enjoying Montfort School very much. He has maintained the good standard he set during his first year by retaining his A Grade for his term exams. Exams were on while I was in

India and a number of the younger children in the Upper Kindergarten year are also doing very well. 7 of them received A+ Grades and 5 received A Grades. However, we cannot expect them all to be geniuses and naturally we have one or two who are not finding it so easy to pick up the English language. The Principal, teachers and staff at Montfort School have all helped with assistance to the children who are benefiting from this project. 23 children are now studying in English at Montfort School – 8 of them live in the St. Joseph's Centre and the remainder are from the poor neighbourhood area. Let's not forget the children who live in the St. Joseph's Centre and go to the Tamil medium school – many of them are also studying well and getting good grades for their school exams.

The annual meeting with the parents is a success.



We held a meeting with all the parents from the neighbourhood whose children are on the English Education Programme. I was grateful to have the Principal's Assistant from Montfort School present at the meeting and also the teachers we've employed to work after school with the children. I spoke to the parents first stressing the importance of them ensuring their child attends school regularly and also attends the after school classes that have been set up. I asked that they spend some time in the evening with their child and their school books. The Principal's Assistant and the teachers then spoke to the parents informing them that this was a great opportunity for their child to have this chance to be educated in English and how important it was for them as parents to give their child all the help they could for their

studies. Then they spoke to each child and their parents individually, covering any individual problems the child had with their school work or appearance. The school offered extra exercise books and informed the parents that they were welcome to come to the school at any time to discuss any fears or concerns they might have regarding their child's education. They then asked for a show of hands from the mothers of who would be interested to learn a little English themselves. A number raised their hands so Montfort School have now offered to run some classes for the mothers to teach them some basic English. I am sure these classes will be very useful to the mothers in the future. The meeting was a great success and gave the teachers and myself an ideal opportunity to get to know the parents better.

The link with Ashley Road School goes from strength to strength.



The link with Ashley Road Primary School in Aberdeen, Scotland and Montfort School is proving to be a real success. Brother George the Principal at Montfort School is delighted with the progress of this project. The children are now communicating with regular e-mails and newsletters. While I was in India I visited the classes who have been involved in this project. They were really enjoying the knowledge they were gaining by learning about the different customs, festivals and schooling in Scotland. The children read with great interest a project which was sent out to them telling them all about Robbie Burns and the Scottish Burns celebrations. A big thank you must go to Lakshmi Manivannan of Ashley Road School for the part she has played in making this link such a great success.

The after school classes continue for the children.



A couple of years ago we employed two teachers to work with the children out with school hours. At Montfort School teacher Betty works with the children on Saturday mornings and during the school holidays to help the children to speak better English. We also have Selvi who spends a couple of hours daily with the children after school while they do their homework. It is a big class for Selvi to deal with but fortunately with 13 of the children being at the same stage in school Selvi is coping well. She has endless patience as continual shouts of 'Excuse me Teacher, please can I have the eraser' are heard throughout the hour!! We have now designated the homework area as 'an English speaking zone' and even after a few weeks I noticed a great improvement in the

children's confidence at speaking in English. These classes are important to ensure the children are given a good grounding in their initial years at the school.

Working to improve the health needs of the children.



Sister Bakkiam had been advised not to take the children to hospital for their health checks last year amidst the fears of the outbreak of Swine-flu. The 6 monthly health checks have now been resumed and while I was in India we took 45 children for their full checks. Little Annie continues to cause some concern with recurring bouts of illness. Annie who is now three years old contracted some health problems from her mother who died of liver disease when Annie was a baby. Annie has spent a number of episodes in and out of hospital for treatments and tests. However this does not prevent her enjoying life—she is a happy, placid wee girl who loves to sing and play action songs. There were problems throughout the rainy season in the St. Joseph's Centre when many were infected with a wave of chickungunya that was sweeping South India. The virus which is spread to humans by infected mosquitoes

causes severe joint pain and fever. We are continuing to try to get a regular doctor to visit the St. Joseph's Centre to check on the children. The Little Drops Charity Trust representatives in India are at present assisting me to find a Doctor who will visit the Centre regularly on a voluntary basis. We are hopeful that this can be set up sometime soon.

The Library expands & a music system is installed in the Centre.



Thanks to a donation I received of children's books, the library I set up last year has now been expanded with a large variety of books for the children. Each child was given a new book as a gift, and the books once read will be added to the library. We are encouraging all the children to use the library whenever possible and they are allowed to take books out for the week. The children are enjoying the books and look forward to Saturday afternoons when we open the library for a couple of hours. Some of the older pupils from Montfort School have been assisting by coming to the St. Joseph's Centre to help the children with their reading on a one to one basis. Also to help with the development and education of the children we have installed a full sound system into the main hall of the St. Joseph's Centre. A new CD/DVD player, amplifier, microphone and speakers system are now in place so the children can enjoy music and DVD's. It will be used with DVD's to teach them traditional Indian

Tamil dances and to teach actions songs to the under five year olds who come in for Day Care. The new sound system will also be used for Indian festival celebrations, Christmas and Easter functions. During my visit we held a singing competition for the children who live in the Centre when they all sang their songs in English. On my final night in India I was treated to a wonderful performance by the children of dancing and singing. With the help of one of the Sisters who has been teaching them traditional Tamil dances their dancing has now become very professional.

We return to the Zoo and children's park for the annual day out.



As usual the children were taken on a day out during my visit. This time we returned to the Zoo and children's park in Chennai which we had visited a few years ago. A great day out was had by all when 55 of us headed off in two mini buses with endless fun and laughter. The children enjoyed the tour of the Zoo, running free from one enclosure to another to see all the animals. Many of them were excited to see for the first time the peacock which is the national bird of India. We had a picnic lunch and then visited the children's park for the rest of the afternoon. Hours of fun was had on the swings, chute, climbing frames and see saws. After a stop for ice cream on the way home many of the children nodded off on the bus after their full day of great excitement. Already they are planning where they want to go next year!!

The Golf Programme suffers without funding from the IGU.



The Golf Programme that I started at Montfort School in 2007 with the help of the R & A and the IGU has suffered with a number of problems. The programme was set up with the teachers using the plastic Tri-Golf kits in the playground and Professionals were teaching the children with junior sets on the golf range nearby. Jayanan the PGA Golf Professional set up by the IGU to head the programme, gave golf to hundreds of pupils at the Montfort School and had started a selection programme for those showing promise. However a sponsor was needed to be found to ensure the programme continued and this fell through at the last minute. The school are still in talks with the IGU and it is hoped that the PGA Professionals will be able to resume in the near future. The IGU are doing all they can to ensure the golf programme continues. In the meantime the school has been running classes conducted by the PE teachers in the playground with the Tri-Golf kits. I visited the golf classes and assisted them with some guidance on how to conduct a proper programme in the interim period. It is frustrating that the full programme has been put on hold but we are confident that with the help of the IGU it will resume in the new school year in June.

WHAT THE PROJECT NOW FUNDS: Funding for the full Hostel Care needs of 22 children who are living in the St. Joseph's Centre. Funding for the English Education Programme with 23 children from the Centre and the

neighbourhood area being educated at an English speaking school. The employment of two teachers to assist with their after school education and a driver to transport them to and from the school. A Health Care Programme and medical supplies for 100 children attending the Day Care and 30 children who are living in the Centre. Christmas gifts, a day out and other treats for all at the St. Joseph's Centre. Four years ago when I started this project the rate of exchange was 84 Rupees to the pound—this year it has dropped to only 65 Rupees. I now need to raise almost 25% more to cover this project so please do help by passing this newsletter on to someone who you think may be able to support this project.
