



The Crest is a registered trademark of The Professional Golfers' Association Limited

Newsletter from Muriel Thomson - 2012

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

Latest news on my Indian Project - March 2012



Hello,

I have just returned from my 7th visit to St. Joseph Social Service Centre. Sister Jayaseeli has now taken on the leading role of running the Centre after the death of the founder Sister Bakkiam and has the support and dedication of all the other workers. Before leaving for my visit to Chennai I received the very sad news that Sister Leema a retired teaching nun at the Centre had passed away. Fortunately my sister Ruth and I arrived in time to pay our respects at her 30 day Mass and have the chance to meet with some of her family. It was winter time in Chennai when we arrived and those at the Centre were wearing their scarves because they were feeling the cold but the temperatures were still soaring up to 30 degrees! Chennai is changing fast in its economic boom but the chaos on the roads still remains. However with the construction of a Metro Rail well under way and due to open in 2015 this should eventually ease the chaotic traffic situation. Changes in the government have meant the introduction of a new school curriculum but unfortunately this was held up and meant that the schools were unable to start their new term on time. Having lost 5 weeks of school the children all had to study very hard to make up on the lost time. Changes were also noticed at the Montfort School with Principal Brother George who set up the school now transferred and a new Principal in place. The school students are finding the new Principal, Brother Arul quite strict as he is enforcing the speaking of English at all times during school hours. Less time for sports and other activities have been put in place at the school to give the students a chance to catch up after the school starting late. My sister Ruth was with me again this visit and the children were so delighted to have 'Ruth Akka' as she is affectionately known back with them once more. It was lovely for us to be back with all the children and to see them growing up and blossoming from this project. A huge thank you once again to all who have supported this project to help the 'children of Chennai'.



The Sister Bakkiam Awards are presented to the schools

It was a great honour for me to go along to three of the schools in the area and present the 'Sister Bakkiam Award' which I set up in memory of Sister Bakkiam the Founder of the St. Joseph Social Service Centre. All three schools were delighted to be included to receive this prestigious award. The Award will be presented annually to one student at each school for outstanding care and consideration of their fellow students. The Award we hope will inspire the school's students to follow in the footsteps of Sister Bakkiam by putting others before themselves in their daily life as Sister Bakkiam did. Each of the recipients received a Certificate and a gift of a Parker pen and the schools were each presented with a gift of books for their library and pens. On my visits to the schools to present the Awards I spoke to the children about Sister Bakkiam telling them how remarkable she was. How back in 1984 she arrived in Chennai as a young Franciscan Nun and found very young children left roaming the streets alone hungry and uncared for while their mothers were out working endless hours earning barely enough to survive on. She immediately took action and took 40 of the children off the streets and gave them daily care with a nutritious meal, proper health care and an education and this was the beginnings of the St. Joseph Social Service Centre. The Centre to-day provides a daily crèche for around 80 children, a home for over 30 semi-orphaned children, a refuge for ladies and provides care to many of the elderly in the community. It has touched the lives of thousands of children over the years and without the compassion and devotion of Sister Bakkiam the St. Joseph Centre would not be here to-day.

Montfort school students continue to blossom

The children on the English Education Programme at Montfort School



continue to do well in their studies. This year we had 5 students getting the highest A+ Grade for their term exams. Hebciba who lives in the neighbourhood has been a star pupil right from her Kindergarten days at school and continues to be an excellent student. Dharini, Vijay Kumar and Keertiga also live in the neighbourhood and are all doing extremely well and speaking very good English too. Vignesh is cared for in the St. Joseph Centre with his younger sister Vidya. Vignesh is a bright boy who is thriving on his education. All of them not only perform well in their exams but they also give their time to help the other students on the Programme who are struggling with their homework. This year I got a very good report from the school about Cyril who was moved from the Marian School to Montfort School last year. Cyril who is now 10 years old initially struggled with the change of school. It also coincided with him having to take a lot of time off to twice attend hospital for ear operations. However he has now settled in well, his grades have improved and he is really enjoying his new school. His English is very good and he loves to translate for the children who are only able to speak Tamil. Brother George who set up the Montfort School has been transferred and the school is now under the guidance of a new Principal - Brother Arul. The children say that their new Principal is a little stricter and all are finding that they have to study a little bit harder. Principal Brother Arul insists that the students at Montfort use English at all times and has told the students he doesn't want to hear them speaking in Tamil during school hours. This I think has made a great deal of difference to the children's confidence at using the English language. Most of them are keener to use the language and not so embarrassed if they make a mistake as they had been on my previous visits. Brother Arul has also introduced text messaging to the parents or guardians. If the students do well they get 'Congratulatory texts' to their parents or guardians, however if they appear late for school, do not hand in their class work on time or if there are any misdemeanours a 'Concern text' is immediately sent requesting some action to be taken.



Children at the local Tamil school also shine



This project also supports 13 other children who live in the St. Joseph Centre and go to the local Tamil speaking schools. 10 year old William is proving to be a real star. He is the top student in his class getting 100% mark for Maths and for his Tamil, English, Science and Social he scored 99%! He is very inventive too and his Head Mistress was very impressed when he arrived in school with a model helicopter he had made from scratch with cardboard, batteries and an old motor, all fitted up and wired to make the blades spin round. William's mother died when he was 6 years old and he has been brought up in the Centre since then along with his two younger sisters Angel and Annie. A number of the other children attending the Tamil school are doing exceptionally well considering they are being brought up in care without individual attention and a great deal of credit for this must go to the staff of the St. Joseph Centre

A computer, dictionaries and atlases for the older children

With the children growing up fast I felt it was the right time for them to have computer access for their school work so a new computer and printer will be installed in the Centre. This will be used for the older children who are at school who need to use the Internet for projects and the likes that they have to do for their school work and exams. It will also be available for administration

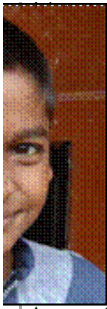
purposes for the Centre and to allow them to have access to e-mail communication. Priscilla our teacher who runs the after school classes for the older children will supervise the use of the computer. I also presented English dictionaries and atlases to the 8-10 year olds for them to use for reference in class and for their homework studies. The homework classes are now split in two—Selvi takes the younger students who are up to 7 years of age and Precilla has the others from 8 years upwards. This is a much better set up with both teachers now able to devote a little bit more time to the children by giving them more individual attention.



Sponsors Day and the Annual Day Out were a great success



This visit we ran a special 'Sponsors Day' party for all the children. The children spent the morning making paper party hats which they decorated and coloured. They also made paper chains of gingerbread men, angels and kings and we decorated them and draped them up around the hall. They loved to have their own work on display. We presented the children with their Sponsors letters and cards before tucking in to a special feast of chicken '65' (an Indian Treat), ice cream and cake. In the afternoon we played games with Musical chairs, balloon games and a particular favourite which was 'Pass the Parcel' which the children had not played before. The children then laid on a their own special performance with singing and traditional Indian dancing. Finally my sister Ruth and I were asked to do our 'party piece' which was met with peels of laughter as we did our own rendition of



hitty bang bang. This year we held our Annual Day Out at MGM—a Disney Park on the outskirts of Chennai. 72 of us which included all the children and the workers from the Centre as well as the other children who are on the English Education Centre. The ladies from the Centre rustled up a picnic for 72 of us with the minimum of fuss and off we set on the bus. As there was great fun on the journey to the park with singing on the bus. On arrival at the fun park we were assigned a guide who was the younger ones around the park. There was a huge selection of rides for all ages and unlimited access to them all. A picnic was served by the ladies in the shade of the trees, then in the afternoon it was off for some fun in the pool. Tradition in India is to go to the pool in fully clothed and that's just what we did! Ruth and I couldn't resist it in the heat of the day and followed the children to the slide pool fully clothed for great fun and laughter then it was off to the wave pool for another soaking. Finally we all were drookin' wet but in the lovely sunshine we were dry again in no time at all. We ended the day with a stop off at the beach to go home for ice cream to complete another great day out.

Annie gets her health sorted out and is finally enrolled for school

Annie who has Glycogen Storage disease is finally getting the help needed for her health problems. Annie, who has been brought up in the St. Joseph Centre since she was a little baby, contracted the disease from her mother at birth. Although there is no cure for her disease some help may be able to be given if a liver biopsy is done to pinpoint the type of Glycogen Storage disease that she has. Annie has a very low immune system and last year a number of health problems prevented her from having the biopsy done. We are hoping that her health will stabilise during the next month so that the biopsy can be done and she can receive some help before she starts at Montfort School when the school year resumes in June. Due to her disease Annie is underdeveloped so although she is now 6 years old she will start in the Lower Kindergarten Stage with the four year olds.



New blackboards, building blocks and toys for the Day Care

The St. Joseph Centre runs a crèche for the local neighbourhood children whose mothers go out working endless hours trying to make enough to make ends meet. Around 80 children under the age of five are taken care of 6 days a week from 8.30am-5.30pm. The equipment in the Crèche was old and broken and long overdue for replacement. We purchased 50 blackboards for the crèche children who are learning to write ABC and a number of learning charts for the crèche teachers' use. For the toddlers in the Crèche we purchased building blocks and some early learning toys to keep them entertained for what can sometimes be a long day for them. It's difficult for the staff at the St. Joseph Centre to keep all the children who live at the Centre amused during the summer holidays so we supplied some new board games, skipping ropes, cricket bats and balls to keep the children entertained throughout the summer holidays. Some new books were added to the library and it is hoped that the library books and the games equipment can now be available to the children at all times.



Supporting the older children for further education

Young Jayamarie who was only 11 years old when I first visited the Centre back in 2006 has now completed her studies at school. She has gone on to take a two year teacher training course at a college in the village of Vandavasi which is 2 ½ hours away from Chennai. During my time in India I visited her at the teachers college and although she misses all her friends that she grew up with back in the Centre she has settled in at the college and has made some new friends there. However she is finding the college work very hard with a lot to pack into a two year course. We will be supporting her college fees and her hostel care in the college. We are also supporting Sailaja for her college fees and accommodation to attend a Chartered Accounting course at a college in Chennai. Pradeep who has left the St. Joseph Centre two years ago to do a carpentry course returned for a visit while I was in India. He has completed the carpentry course but could not find a job in carpentry. However during my final week he did manage to get a job as a trainee supervisor with a company in Chennai's harbour area and hopes that this will become a permanent post for him in the future.



Plans are in motion to renovate the Centre

During my final week in India I spoke with Sister Jayaseeli about the possibility of upgrading the living conditions at the St. Joseph Centre. The main problem with the Centre is that all the children and workers have to use the main hall which accommodates the daily Crèche, for sleeping, eating and studying. With a number of the boys and girls now grown up it is not suitable that they are all sleeping in the same area. We are at present looking into the possibility of extending the Centre to provide separate sleeping areas for the boys and girls and provide proper areas for the children to keep their personal possessions. We are also looking at upgrading the washing rooms for the children and the workers as well as painting the whole of the St. Joseph Centre inside and out.



WHAT THIS PROJECT COVERS – This project funds all the Hostel Care needs for 25 semi-orphaned children who are living in the St. Joseph's Centre. It funds the education at the English speaking Montfort School for 28 children from the St. Joseph's Centre and the poor neighbourhood area. School uniforms are provided for 45 children at English and Tamil schools as well as uniforms for around 80 crèche children. We employ two teachers to assist with their homework, and a driver to transport the children to and from school. A Health Programme is funded for regular health checks for around 80 children under 5 year old who live in the neighbourhood and we provide medical care for the children who are living in the St. Joseph's Centre. An Annual Day Out, Christmas gifts and other treats are provided for around 50 children and staff at the Centre. Various other things as required are funded through this project.

Please pass this Newsletter on to someone you think may be able to support this project.

My thanks go to Sister Jayaseeli and all the staff at St Joseph's Social Service Centre, to the 'Little Drops Charity Trust', Montfort Matriculation Secondary School and St. Thomas Hospital for all their help and assistance with this project.

If you are interested in giving a donation or would like me to run my presentation talk on my work in India please contact me at Portlethen Golf Club, Badentoy Road, Portlethen, ABERDEEN, AB12 4YA. Tel 01224 -782571.

All donation cheques should be made payable to: '**Little Drops Charity Trust**'– (Registration Number: SC 028069) and sent to Muriel Thomson at Portlethen Golf Club marked 'Personal'.

Please note that 100% of your donation goes directly to my project—all, postage and administration costs are borne by myself.

Click [here](#) to return to 'Home Page'