

Art for a Global Voice

"I went to India with the universal language of art. Colour is universal, instinctively you choose one. This immediately means you have something in common with every other life in the world".

Held at Development House on the 9th July 2009, the 'Art for a Global Voice' event began interactively.



Giving a 'hand'

As people entered, they were invited to choose a coloured paper 'hand'. These were then added to the global voice mandala. As explained by Mythili, 'with the simple act of choosing a colour, you have given your 'hand' to a global message'.

People were then given two petals, one blue and one orange. The audience was asked to write down one issue that they feel is contributing to global poverty on the blue petal. After an introduction to AFP from Director Bala Thakrar, Mythili began her talk about her journey as an international volunteer, her work with the girls of Udayan Care and that of Mandalas.

"I had no expectations what children would be like, I saw the journey as being more about me. I initially had the intention of doing some artwork or painting a mural in a school, but AFP saw my potential to do more in depth work. The truth is, I didn't have time to think about applying, I just did it. If I had thought too much about it, I probably wouldn't have done it! Coming to the interview, I was happy to learn it was very much about what we can do together, and how my skills can be matched with the organisations in India.

When I first arrived in Greater Noida (near Delhi) and saw the house where I was going to live, it was very much like a fortress. I just thought *'What am I doing here?'* Life was very different to that in England. However it didn't take long to think of time completely differently, and to be honest it was quite liberating not to be a slave to time.

My work was centred around introducing softer concepts that would work alongside their mainstream education. I chose to do this in the form of Mandalas, which are defined (according to Wikipedia) as *'employed for focusing attention of aspirants and adepts; as a spiritual teaching tool; for establishing a sacred space; and as an aid to meditation and trance induction'*. This seemed to resonate quite well with the circumstance of the girls, who were in need of a sacred space. Most come from very difficult backgrounds which include being orphaned, escaping abuse, as well as living off the streets.



Mythili

To encourage the girls to see themselves more confidently, I did a lot of work with positive affirmations. I wrote out 40 odd sentences which include sentences such as 'I am good at Maths' but I received a huge shock when the girls came up with extremely deep and spiritual affirmations such as 'I am love and

light'. I had to face the harsh reality that my sentences were actually patronising as the girls thought much deeper. Each girl made a positive affirmation book that they carried around. These were then fed into the Mandalas. It was really heartening to see that every visitor (and potential funders) that came to the home had to listen to the affirmations. It was such a successful activity that the security guard got involved in as well!

What did I gain from the experience overall? 40 sisters whom I miss very much! I'm definitely looking forward to January when I am going back, to carry on the next phase. The girls were very active hence it became a challenge organising the girls and creating an emotional distance as it was a very isolating place. However, the way I see it, had I thought too much about it I never would have done it. I don't like going out of my comfort zone and this took me way out of it, but in the end it was one of the most fulfilling experience I've ever had. "



Event attendees

Mythili's talk generated a lot of questions from the audience. Regarding how informal education was received, the Udayan Care home was actually very receptive to the idea of art in education. The mandalas helped ground the girls to find a positive space which then helped them focus more on formal education. . It was a pre-meditated decision to choose mandalas as the educational medium and they were a perfect prelude as everybody loves shapes and colour

When asked if one can emotionally prepare for the volunteer journey and what one is exposed to, Mythili was very frank. Nobody can truly prepare. However there is a lot of learning that can be shared once the volunteer is back in the UK. There is a stark contrast between young people in the UK (its cool to appear bad) whereas in India, young people think its cool to be good.

People were also very interested to know what the girls go on to do after Udayan care. The reality is that all are very ambitious and have great aspirations. At Udayan care, they have structure, are very supported to follow and maintain goals and targets. Also, girls who leave the home and go on to jobs tend to give money back to the home once they have left. They are supported from when they enter till their marriage, which is also paid for by Udayan Care. Young orphan and street girls who don't know their surnames are given the common surname 'Udayan' so they never feel alone.



Completed global Mandala

As people sat inspired by Mythili's journey, they were then asked to revisit the issue they wrote about on the blue petal. Using a bright orange petal, people wrote down a solution to the issue. The two were put onto the mandala, clinching their 'global voice'.

NB: Art for a global voice was part of AFP's Jagruti programme, which raises awareness of development issues in the UK. The programme is supported by DFID and VSO. Mythili volunteered in India through AFP's Paropkaar programme. The work with Mandalas that was done by Mythili still continues as this model is being rolled out to other care homes in India. Mythili has also received a request to undertake similar work with another partner organisation based in Uttar Pradesh.

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