

Clare's Diary

3rd November 2010

Wednesday

A small cement building in a field comprises the drop in centre for children who are misusing substances. It is packed when we arrive, the youngest boy there is about 6 years old. There are tears in his eyes although his curiosity about our visit seems to distract him a little. This is the first stage in HOPE'S rehabilitation process. Most of the kids here today survive by working on the trains that pull in and out of the nearby train station. They leap aboard risking life and limb to scavenge for recyclable objects, scraps of food, anything they can salvage. Sniffing glue is often the only escape they have. We also visit HOPE'S long-term rehabilitation centre. Here the children are provided with a roof, food, protection, education, vocational training but most importantly, love; something that is alien to most of them. It is heartwarming to meet some of the boys currently undergoing treatment, it is proof that this system is making a difference. Proof that it is changing lives. The evening brings a trip to the HOPE hospital. Here we meet Papiya, a one year old baby with huge brown eyes and a wonderful giggle. She has a congenital heart defect and was abandoned shortly after she was born. Fortunately for her, HOPE intervened. She has had three heart operations and is now healthy and happy.

Thursday

We enter the ward of the RCFC polio hospital to find the children quiet and sedate. All of them are in bed, pre or post surgery. A couple of them have painful looking casts and screws on both legs and as such their movement is limited. Within half an hour we have caused mayhem, we raid the playroom and between games of ludo, puzzles and cards we soon have all the kids laughing and shouting. James, playing games with one little boy called Bam Bam unwittingly gives me a black eye by snapping his elbow backwards. He is petrified that it is going to swell badly but luckily one of the nurses is on hand with ice. This evening we visit a partnership mental health project. I am excited to see the service given my professional background and glad that somebody is doing some work within mental health as here it remains a taboo subject. While it is evident that the staff here are doing a wonderful job with such limited resources, I am still shocked by the lack of provision for people with mental health problems. This is the only service of its kind in the whole city. I experience my first feelings of anger at the injustice of it all.

Friday

A little time off today and the chance to have an Ayurvedic massage this morning. The afternoon brings an interesting presentation by HOPE and their NGO partners. This evening we are guest of honour at a Diwali celebration in the New Kenilworth Hotel. The music is a fascinating combination of east meets west with percussionists World Music Project.

Saturday

Foundation Day at last! Today 600 children involved in HOPE projects perform on a large stage in front of a huge crowd. The dancing is spectacular, it is hard to believe these are only schoolkids and not professional dancers, they could certainly teach me a few moves! The whole production is incredibly professional and one can appreciate the skill it takes to even organize 600 children backstage. The performance ends with a rendition of both Irish and Indian national anthems. The whole thing is such a celebration but I must admit to shedding a few tears. The enormity of the task at hand hits me full force, it is exhilarating to see how happy the children here are but it is hard to avoid the thought of all the others who are still out there, alone and vulnerable, and needing help. Today is also a religious festival celebrating the goddess Kali and we are lucky enough to be invited to an immersion. This is where a statue of Kali is carried on a truck (surrounded by all of us dancing madly and setting off fireworks) to the river where it is immersed into the water. It is such an honour to be able to take part in something so traditional.

Sunday

We wander around an old part of Kolkata called Newmarket. Here the poverty is difficult to avoid, there are children tugging at our clothes looking for money. Fortunately I have a giant bag of sweets which I hand out to them instead. Their smiles in response to such a small gesture almost breaks my heart. I am so glad that we have time this afternoon to visit Mother Theresa's tomb. The second you walk into the convent you feel calm. It is an incredibly peaceful place with a wonderful museum; I am awestruck when I read the details of her life and achievements, the world rarely sees such altruism.

Monday

This morning we visit Arumina HIV and AIDS Hospice for children affected by AIDS. It strikes me how much the charity have achieved in only 11 years. Through the variety of projects they offer HOPE currently works with 16,000 children and families. Since its foundation over 250,000 people have benefited from its primary healthcare services. The fact that this has all come from one woman's desire to change the world is inspirational. James and I go out with the Nightwatch Ambulance team tonight. It is easier to spot vulnerable people at night when city life has slowed so every evening a number of ambulance teams patrol different districts checking up on children and families they know to be at risk and assessing those who seem like they might need help. Tonight we visit a number of families who live in the arches under a railway bridge. They welcome us with open arms, asking if we would like some food despite the fact that they have barely enough to survive. Cue a few more tears on the journey home.

Tuesday

This morning we visit Chetla Slum school. The kids here range from three years olds and upwards and climb all over us mischievously. Here the language barrier doesn't matter, they are just pleased to play clapping games, sing songs or teach funny handshakes. Once school has finished many of them go back to work, standing in the filthy river trying to fish out plastic from the piles of rubbish floating down. I am sad to be leaving Kolkata today but I have a feeling that what I have seen and learned here will stay with

me for a long time yet. Tonight I fly to visit my family in Hyderabad; they meet me at the airport with shouts and yells, garlands of roses, posters and pictures. The familial love I am guilty of so often taking for granted has never been more appreciated.