



May 2009

Dear Friends,

We are winding up the 2008-2009 school year; there are just two more days left to go. This has been my fifth year with the school. For various reasons, mostly having to do with teenage boys and interpersonal relations, it has been my hardest yet. But I think that the school as a whole is progressing nicely. This year we had by far the best teaching team ever with lots of camaraderie among the teachers and real teaching from the heart. Each and every one of my teachers has a real desire to help our students excel. It is a joy to see the sincerity in their work. Also, they have become more vocal and participatory in teacher's meetings. Whereas before they mostly listened to what I was trying to say, now they come up with their own ideas for improving the school.

One of their ideas was to have a general knowledge mini-competition every Friday at dismissal time -- just 15 minutes of oral questions related to politics, geography, history, etc. Every six weeks we hold a written exam based on the questions that have been asked the previous weeks. The winner of that test wins a small prize. A second idea was to give the older students a chance to address the whole school by giving them a voice on Wednesday morning assemblies. One student must present a "thought for the day" (on other days these are presented by teachers in turn). He may choose the topic and say whatever he likes about it. Another change for the upcoming school year will be the opening of a small store. This will be run by the 6th grade students who will have to keep track of the cash box and inventory. Next year, students who win prizes (for perfect attendance etc.) will be given tokens that can be used in the store. Other students will be able to pay cash for various items like snacks, paint sets, notebooks, small toys, shampoo, etc. This way the students can work for prizes that they really want and they will be able to save up tokens to purchase a bigger prize.

This year's big event was our annual day program held on Feb 7. It was an immense venture with tremendous support provided by Jeanie Miller of International Ambassadors of Music (IAM). Jeanie and a friend, Barbara Harrison, came up with the entire concept for the project and came from the US to pull the final bits of our musical together. IAM donated several books and DVDs related to the theme of our program (the ocean and our hero: a fish who learned that the best place for him was in school). They also shipped loads of items for stage decoration and costumes for several of the actors. The creme de la creme was their donation of several musical instruments including recorders, various percussion instruments, and three gorgeous symphony-quality xylophones. We may be the only school in India, certainly in Uttar Pradesh (our state), with such beautiful instruments. The xylophones were certainly a new sound for our students and helped make our performance really special. I am hoping that our music teacher will be able to use the instruments to their full potential and that our school will have an enviable music program on into the future.

Our performance went well. The children did great, and the number of spectators was absolutely astonishing. We got permission to hold the performance right on the shore of the Ganges River at a popular hangout spot. The river provided a beautiful backdrop to our watery theme. We had a procession from our school to the stage location, a 20 minute (rowdy!) walk. The children, dressed in their costumes and carrying some of the ocean stage decoration, blew kazoos and chanted a chant that had been written especially for the school:



We're the kids of Asha Deep  
See us marching down the street  
We're strong, we're smart, so hear us say  
We've got the light  
We're on our way!  
Sound off: 1 – 2, Sound off: 3 - 4  
Sound off: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4!



When we got to the location, the wide stairs that provided audience seating were about half full of people. We got the kids seated behind the stage curtains and made final preparations for the show. The program opened with one of our teachers as the MC. Standing in front of the curtain, he introduced the show and conducted some necessary formalities (including my speech which was very short since I had lost my voice). Finally we were ready to get on with the performance. I wish someone had taken a photo of the kids' faces when the curtain finally opened. About 50 of them were sitting in rows facing the audience for our opening school scene. When the curtain opened and they saw that audience for the first time their eyes got as big as saucers -- the stairs were absolutely packed. It was standing room only, and plenty of people WERE standing. What a crowd! There were easily over 1000 people there. Seeing that was a huge encouragement to the kids. They had worked so hard to get ready. Now was their big chance. They sang and danced and joked their little hearts out. So many in the crowd were commenting how surprised they were at how well these poor children were performing. They really did a fantastic job.



The biggest problem was electricity. There were two long gaps in the middle of the program. We had rented a generator in case of a power outage, but the generator also failed. In the second gap it took about 20 minutes, just 3 items short of the end of the program, to bring a second generator and get it functioning. It was surprising how many people stayed through the gaps to see the end of the show.

Unfortunately, the women who came

to help with the program both had health problems mainly related to the pollution in the city. There are so many more people and cars in Banaras now than there were even five years ago. The air quality is very poor. Jeanie Miller, the inspiration behind the whole program, was not even able to attend the performance. Still, she says that even if she had known how difficult it would be, she would have chosen to make the trip and make the program happen. We appreciate both women and their efforts so much and hope that the results of their prayers and efforts here will have positive effects for years to come. Just yesterday I was walking with some of the school boys down near the area where the program had taken place. A stranger called out, "Hey, where's Kallu?" (the star of our show). "Kallu" was with me, so he flashed the man his winning smile. The kids are famous!



After the program, we got back into serious academics, trying to get the kids ready for their final exams which just finished last Friday. Most of the kids did well and will be promoted a grade in next year's session which will begin on July 1st after summer holidays.

love, Connie