

March 2015

Dear Friends,

Due to an extraordinarily long winter, we were only able to open the school for ten days in January (out of 19 planned working days). We got back into the swing slowly opening the school from 9 - noon for the first week of bearable temperatures, gradually lengthening the day to our usual 8 - 3 school schedule on the third week. Because of the long break, we only had about one month to prepare for our annual Spring Extravaganza which took place on March 3. This year we had 18 items on the program including juggling, hula hoop, songs, dances, and a drama about gossip. My principal's speech this year highlighted the fact that Asha Deep's purpose is to give a real chance to those who have traditionally been denied access to basic education.



आशा दीप विद्याश्रम

My favorite moment was seeing little Vinumra starring in staff. He's a little guy who's been studying (admittedly not so regularly) in our school for four years. However, he has trouble learning and is still only in our higher level kindergarten. Because he is a slow learner, he is sometimes teased or ignored by other students. But, he came daily to learn from the Performers Without Borders team that trains our students in circus skills for a month before our show. They put Vinumra front center twirling staff with six other boys. Being the smallest and sporting a huge smile, he quickly became a crowd favorite. Near the end of the item, one of the bigger boys hoisted him up on his shoulders where he continued to twirl. It was a beautiful moment of limelight for this struggling boy. I've noticed that some of the children who struggle academically really shine during our show. It brings them some well needed respect from other students.

We've had several concerns this term. Swine flu has spread in India with the death toll crossing 1,700. We were worried about this epidemic sweeping through the poor, crowded slum area where our students live. But, thankfully, cases in Banaras have been rare so far. One of our graduates should have started 9th grade last year but she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. After testing, it was determined to be the drug resistant strain. She was able to enroll in a government program to receive low-cost medicines, but because of the type of tuberculosis she has, she has to take second-line drugs which aren't as effective, take longer, and have more side effects. One of the tolls has been the loss of her hearing. The doctors say that she will regain her hearing when she is off the drugs, but this must be a lonely and scary time for her. She will need to take the medicines for one more year.

I also became concerned for another student, also a 9th grader, who has gotten involved in gambling and drinking. He had tried off and on to stop his bad habits, but was unable to break away from what was gripping him. In the end, I decided that the only way to help him would be for him to stay at my house for awhile, away from temptations. Two weeks ago, he came to meet me at home. I said, "Do you think you will be able to end these addictions?" He said, "Maybe if I stayed with you." I was surprised that we had both been thinking about the same solution. I said, "I've been thinking exactly the same thing." He asked, "from when?" Seeing no reason to delay, I said, "today." He went home, got some clothes and a toothbrush and moved in that evening. The first week was tough because he was mentally distant and depressed. But, slowly he is getting better . . . smiling and taking an interest in life. Now he is struggling with withdrawal symptoms, but he has not gambled or drunk alcohol for two weeks now.

Right now we are preparing to place our graduating 8th graders in local high schools. This year, we have decided to place our graduates in one of three different schools depending on their abilities. One student has specifically asked to study in a Hindi-medium school and we will fulfill that request. Some of our students have been studying well consistently and have developed good study habits. They will do well in the English-medium high school that most of our previous graduates attend. Four of our current students, for various reasons, have not been as regular in studies. For these students we have found a second option through another non-profit organization that serves children similar to ours. They offer English-medium classes which will prepare our 9th graders to pass a national open school 10th grade exam. Once they pass, they will be able to continue in this program until they pass 12th class or they could switch into a normal high school in 11th grade. Class sizes are small, so our students will receive the attention they need to succeed. This option is a bit experimental for us but, if successful, could be the model for all future graduates. Its shortcoming is that it provides less social acclimatization (currently our students are the only dalit (low caste) students at their high school; they must learn how to deal with the prejudices they will face in the future). However, the cost is much lower. I

have attached a brochure introducing this year's graduates. Please take time to read a brief paragraph about each one! Costs to sponsor an individual student range from \$15/month to \$48/month. If you would like to contribute to these costs, please let me know! I need to find sponsors for everyone.

We have only five teaching weeks left before final exams. Our summer holidays will be starting on May 6th. Scroll down to see a few photos from our Spring Extravaganza!

love, Connie



*clowning around*



*joy on stage*



*The kids drew pictures to decorate the back of the stage*



*A great shot of Ajay, the boy that had dropped out because of his father's drinking earlier this year. He did a fantastic job in the drama about gossip!*



*Vinumra and others twirling staff*



*Our older girls dancing. Three of these girls come from extremely abusive home situations.*

*Our program, just three days before the colorful Holi festival, included a song and dance punctuated by throwing colored powders.*

