

Educating Youth in Remote Indian Village

BY RICK SKWIOT

Unlike countless other 15-year-olds in rural India, Sravanthi Kanuri is not starting a family or working in rice fields for a dollar a day. Instead, she has been learning English and journalism from a Washington University student/volunteer teacher at Pai Junior College in the village of Kalleda.

"Trisha Madam tells us the right way to speak and write," says Sravanthi. "Now I have two ambitions: teaching and journalism."

"Trisha Madam," senior anthropology major Trisha Wolf, spent her summer vacation teaching at the Rural Development Foundation (RDF) school in the Andhra Pradesh hinterlands, along with five other Washington U. undergrads, in the University's Village India Program. But she got as good as she gave.

"The people impacted me," says Wolf. "As I worked with the kids, we all gained confidence. I'm going to miss them, and I couldn't have loved them more."

Anthropology Professor Glenn D. Stone, who initiated and orchestrates the Village India Program, says that the affection and learning go both ways.

"This experience has a profound effect on both the University undergrads and their Indian students. You should see the bedlam and tears when the program ends," says Stone. "For our students, living in an Indian village is more valuable than anything we could convey in a classroom."

Senior Alma Carver, an anthropology and economics double major, concurs.

"India captured my heart in a way I didn't expect. I knew I would be learning a lot about cultures and teaching, but I never thought I would come away with so much," says Carver, who is eyeing Peace Corps or Teach For America work upon graduating.

The profound opportunities the six-week Village India Program presents both to Washington U. students and to students at the junior college (equivalent to U.S. high school junior and senior grades) sprang from Stone's work. Over the years, Stone has studied agricultural practices and biotechnology's effects on the transmission of traditional knowledge among poor cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh.

There, he encountered Rammohan Rao Errabelli, a descendant of the family that once dominated agriculture, commerce, and transportation in the area. In 1996, Rao and other family members founded the RDF—dedicated to providing high-quality education to rural children who otherwise might get only limited training at substandard government schools—and turned the enormous



Glenn D. Stone

former family mansion into a grade school. The RDF now runs four rural schools in Kalleda and surrounding villages plus Pai, educating some 500 students in grades K-12 and emphasizing English-language education for the native Telugu-speaking children.

"The RDF offers both education and opportunities for poor rural people that keep them engaged in their communities," says Stone, noting that 99 percent of RDF students go on to junior college versus just 15 percent of government-school students.

He also saw value for Washington University undergraduates in the RDF schools.

"As soon as I saw what they were doing for rural education, I started trying to figure out how to get Washington University students over here," says Stone. "I recognized it would be a wonderful opportunity for them. It gets them into a village—which is tough to do in a study-abroad program—allows them to work closely with an NGO (nongovernmental organization), and teaches them how interventions for the poor really work."

Those opportunities were valuable particularly to junior economics major Sumit Agarwal, whose parents came to America in 1984 from northern India and who looks forward to a career in social entrepreneurship.

"I wanted to do something socially for India and to learn about NGOs, and this was a great place to start," says Agarwal, who taught Web design to his first-year Pai students and Indian and American government to his second-year students.

While those were his nominal topics, his teaching focused on developing his students' computer, English, and reasoning skills.

"Those skills are much more valuable than learning Web design," says Agarwal. "Indian schools are tracked factually, focusing on rote learning. I was trying to get them to do comparative and evaluative thinking."

Agarwal himself came away with valuable lessons. Although he had traveled to India twice before, he knew only the India of his affluent New Delhi relatives. Working and living among poor rural Indians affected him deeply.

"The No. 1 thing I discovered was how fortunate I am to be an NRI (nonresident Indian). I have the best of both worlds—the high U.S. standard of living and the values of Indian culture, the focus on family and respect," says Agarwal.

University undergrads lived at the junior college along with many of their students and ate food prepared by a village cook. While they enjoyed running water and electricity, the water was cold and

the current occasional. The neighboring towns of Kalleda and Parvathagiri offered them dirt roads and little diversion by American standards. However, they did learn how to milk water buffalo, plow rice paddies with oxen, and plant rice.

"I had underestimated my ability to adapt to such a rural, outdoor setting," says junior design major Mike Hirshon, who taught drawing at Pai and who, the three previous years, taught at American summer camps. "I definitely lived more ruggedly than I thought I could."

India also altered Hirshon as an artist: "It changed my style. India is so different from America; everything has another dimension and texture."

But what affected him most were the students and villagers.


"The people are so genuine, so different from in America, so open," he says.

Yet those differences open pathways to learning for both students and teachers, says sophomore photography major Lane Goodman, who taught photography at Pai.

"We have so much to share and learn just by talking," says Goodman. "The greatest gift we can give is education, to show them how our lives are, and they in turn educate us: 'Look at how different our lives are from yours.'"

Senior anthropology and political science major Jessica Farrell agrees.

"I think it's remarkable how we are able to truly connect despite great differences in our lives," she says. "I embrace the power of language. I never thought about how blessed I am to have a language that is used and understood everywhere."

Now, thanks in part to the efforts of these Washington University undergrads, poor Indian students are gaining that same power. 

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For more information on the Village India Program, please visit: <http://artsci.wustl.edu/~anthro/RDF/vip/index.htm>.

Among other University programs with India connections are the Olin Business School's partnership with the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta: <http://news-info.wustl.edu/news/page/normal/11835.html>; the George Warren Brown School of Social Work and Tata Institute for Social Sciences' Institute in India: <http://gwb-web.wustl.edu/ProspectiveStudents/Pages/InternationalInstitutes.aspx>; and the law school's long-standing relationships with two law schools and several NGOs in Nepal: <http://law.wustl.edu/international/index.asp?ID=6053>.

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Left: Junior Mike Hirshon (standing), a design major, taught drawing at Pai Junior College in the village of Kalleda. He was among six WUSTL students spending their summer vacation teaching in the Village India Program.