



March 2011

Dear Friends,

The last few months at Asha Deep Vidyashram have been volunteer-packed! It is so wonderful to have the enthusiasm and help of so many talented people.

In late December, a group of people came a couple days after school and did parachute play with about 50 children. If you got to play with a parachute in your school days, you will certainly have wonderful memories of those times. We had a parachute donated to the school some time ago. It was so nice that our students will get to have some of those same wonderful memories of their school days. Parachute play promotes rhythm, coordination, cooperation, and laughter.



In January, a group of Korean young adults came and spent several days playing games and supervising crafts for the children. These events took place during winter break when all the schools were forced to close because of the cold. While 40 degrees may not sound so cold to you, it IS cold when you remember that there is no heating in homes or the



school. The thin mats that the children typically sit on offer scant protection from the chilly cement floor. Holding a pencil and writing is difficult in those temperatures. So, the kids got a break from studies, but they had the chance to have fun in the afternoons because of our Korean volunteers. The volunteers did a wonderful job choosing activities that were easy to explain and would be enjoyed by children of all ages. The pace and variety in each afternoon was the perfect cure for vacation boredom. This group also brought a substantial financial gift to the school - money that had been raised by caring Korean students. We so much appreciate their time, effort, and concern for the school.

Another couple of Korean gentlemen were traveling through the city and found out about our school. They had a couple afternoons free and spent some of their vacation fixing our back fence which had been in need of repair.

In a bigger backyard improvement project, a couple of guys, one British and one American, designed and built (with the help of a few friends) a climbing structure surrounding one of the trees in our playground. Made entirely of bamboo and rope, ladders lead to a large platform about 10 feet above the ground. Well-built and sturdy, the platform can hold around 50 kids. The space created underneath the platform feels like a play house and the kids hung swings from the sides to add to the pleasure. This construction is our only piece of play equipment and is well-appreciated by the children. Many take their lunch up to eat on the elevated platform. It's not unknown to adults either!



In February, an Australian woman conducted an art competition for the children in 2nd through 7th grade. She taught them some still-life painting skills and each of the children painted the same scene over a period of a couple days. Later, we judged the entries and awarded prizes to the winners. These days were a special treat for the children.

Not exactly in the volunteer category, but well worth mention was the gift of a guitar to the school. I was standing just outside the school gate when I was approached by an Eastern Asian gentleman. He asked how long I had been in Varanasi. I told him 12 years. He asked if I ran a non-profit organization. I said, "Yes, I run a school." He asked where it was. I said, "It's right here!" His face lit up. "Oh, I have something for you!" he said, "could you use a guitar?" He came the next day bringing a steel-string guitar with a pick-up for amplification. Some of the kids are interested in learning to play guitar. Maybe we can get another volunteer to teach them! This gentleman was leaving Varanasi and wanted to get rid of some stuff. It was lucky that we were one of the recipients. Have you ever had someone walk up to you and ask if you would like a guitar?

Still in February, we received a visit from an American couple, Donny and Brooke. This couple spent two years with the Peace Corps in Jamaica and since have started their own non-profit, the GROW Initiative ([www.growinitiative.org](http://www.growinitiative.org)). While most of their projects are in South America, they are currently on an Asian tour to see how various non-profits are running here and to help wherever possible. They found out about our school through a mutual friend. Most of their projects have to do with English or computer training or environmental awareness. At our school, they presented seminars to our older students on environmental topics using PowerPoint,



activities, games, and prizes. The astonishing thing about their visit was the timing -- they were available at the exact time we had been planning to focus on the environment in our regular science curriculum. Their visual and highly interactive presentation really got through to the kids, and, after several years of trying to get them to understand about proper trash disposal, keeping the Ganges River clean, not using plastic, etc., I think this presentation made enough of an impact to change the kids lifestyles to some extent. We are fighting a huge battle in this area as most of the community is unaware of these issues and the kids daily see their parents and everyone else following harmful environmental practices. They think, "but everyone else does it! What difference does it make if we change?" Donny and Brooke also helped build the treehouse mentioned above and spent several sessions teaching our teachers basic computer skills such as searching the internet and creating PowerPoint presentations. We appreciate their help so much and wish them the best as they continue their journey of learning and service.



This month the PWB (Performers Without Borders) team is here teaching the children circus skills such as juggling, poi, acrobalance, etc. Many of you will remember that this group has come twice before--they come every two years. They put on their own performance at our school on February 28. Well attended, it was a great show with clowning, drama, circus tricks, and fire dancing. Since then and for the whole month, they will be teaching our students who will put on their own show for the public on March 26. Along with the circus acts, we will be adding our own song, dance and drama to the show. The kids absolutely love putting on this show. The hard work it takes and the sense of accomplishment it brings draws the school together every year.

Finally, I must tell you that there will be some upcoming changes in the school since I have decided to return to the States for a three-year period starting in May. My son, now 14, has been struggling here for some time. His biggest problem has been school; he absolutely hates going. Some months ago I realized that if I were to do the best thing for him, I would take him to California to finish his high school education. I looked into various options, but in the end decided to come back to the US. I informed my teachers of the decision about one month ago. They were shocked at first, but the beautiful thing was that they all were determined to keep the school running. Each and every one said they just could not let the children down. They know that if the school closed, most of the children would simply stop going to school. Since this is the driving concern of the teachers, I know that the school will continue to function as it should.

I will remain involved in the school as much as possible, requiring monthly reports from the teachers and a select group of students. I will occasionally join teacher's meetings through internet video conferencing and can do some computer work from abroad. I have divided up my work among the teachers and am spending this month training them in their various tasks. Most of the teachers have been with me for 4-6 years and well understand my philosophy and approach to education. It is time for them to step up and rise to greater challenges. The school may indeed improve in my absence allowing me to return after three years as English teacher and advisor without reassuming all my current workload.

To those of you who send financial contributions to the school, I hope your support will continue. We will need the money as much as ever; in fact expenses will increase next year as we admit yet another batch of new students. Also, due to lack of funds, I was unable to give our teachers a raise this year. Living expenses here have been skyrocketing

though, plus the teachers will be taking on added responsibilities next year. I would like to give each of them a substantial raise next year. (Current salaries range from about \$100 - \$130 per month. These are good salaries compared with other schools but they are barely enough for supporting a family.) Also this month we will have extra expenses for staging our performance on March 26. If anyone would like to contribute toward this, we would certainly appreciate it.

love, Connie