

April 2022

Dear Friends,

In January, as is typical, all Varanasi schools were ordered to close due to low temperatures. Our brick building and cement floors are designed to be cool, so, without heating, our classrooms are bone-chilling during winter. Normally, we get a two-week winter vacation, but this year our break was extended by an extra month due to a third wave of corona that swept through the country. The six-week enforced break wiped out any possibility of holding a small -- for parents and invited guests only -- performance event at school. We are missing our normal Spring Extravaganza public song and dance performance!



Thankfully, the January corona wave had little serious effect (except for the school closure). Although many in the community did get sick, most got through it as one would a normal flu, feeling better in 3-4 days (most had been vaccinated by that time). Hospitals were never overwhelmed, and we did not witness the huge jump in cremations the way we did last April and May.

I took some advantage of the extra time off to call our teachers for some training sessions, led by a German volunteer with copious amounts of both education and practical experience in the field of education, including work with the poor here in Varanasi. She focused her initial workshops on how to help children with learning disabilities, an area in which our teachers have had very little instruction. Later, after we were able to re-open in mid-February, she also came into classrooms to observe our teachers. Subsequent training sessions included ideas which could reduce some of the shortcomings she observed. Although she is now enroute to Germany, she plans to continue providing some training via video.



Kati teaching our teachers

Our students were ready to get back into study after the extended break in January, and we were able to get back into good study quickly. Although we had to tone down some ambitious plans for expanding our curriculum near the end of the school year, most of our teachers will be able to cover the core topics so that students will be caught up from the extra corona closures we have suffered over the last two years. We had a short break for Holi after which, thankfully, for the first time since 2020, we were allowed to continue our lives as usual. We now have just three weeks left before final exam week at the end of this month. The last month of the school year is always invigorating with good attendance, good attention in class, and happy anticipation of the upcoming summer vacation.



Here are our 2nd and 3rd graders back to school!





Our 2nd graders made some clay vegetables

Speaking of Holi, we celebrated nicely this year! Usually at that time of year, most of our efforts have gone into our Spring Extravaganza. We do play with dry colored powders, but many teachers and even some children don't participate. But this year, we really needed something to bring that family feel into the school. After two years of never assembling all



together, we took advantage of the lull following January's covid wave



to play big! We decorated the back field and put on some dance music for an hour and a half of color, play, and dance. It was a lot of fun.

Teachers and students played together

As far as the new school building goes, we've made some progress. We signed a formal agreement with a contractor on February 18. Our goal is to complete our main school building by next March. Preliminary work on the site has begun with the delivery of bricks and sand; the construction of an office, storeroom, and toilet for the workmen; and digging a massive hole for the foundation. The first cement, the bottom of the foundation, will be poured tomorrow.



How the hole was dug. These guys remind me of the adorable vehicles in the movie Cars

Dirt from the hole in front of the workmen's office. This photo shows the edge of the village from where most of the students will come to study. The photographer is standing near the middle of the land facing south





Now the photographer has turned 180 degrees to face north. The foundation hole has been dug and the location of the structural walls marked out. The middle area has been untouched because the classrooms will encircle a central courtyard. The ground floor of the building will be about two feet higher than the high land shown here.

Those of you who have been following us for more than two years will remember that we typically have a visit from a Performers Without Borders team during the month of February (leading up to our annual performance). They have not come for the past two years due to corona, but the skills that they have taught our students over the years survive! A small team of our former students occasionally performs juggling, poi, staff, hula hoop, etc. for parties. It gives them a bit of extra income. This same team has taken it upon themselves to teach some of the residents of Narottampur, the village where our new school is being built. They've been going there almost every Sunday for the past several weeks, and they have good participation from both children and some women of the village. It's a great way for us to start interacting with the people there.



And finally, I'm happy to announce that five more Asha Deep students have just now graduated from Class 8! We'll be having a farewell party for them this coming Wednesday, and they'll be starting high school in the coming week.

love,
Connie

*Our latest graduates:
Soni, Ayush, Suruchi, Mithun, and Poonam*