

Goethals Himalayan Hope & Welfare Society

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Dear Friends,

I have just been re-reading -- which I have done a million times over the years -- a letter Fr. Abraham wrote to me and my wife four years back which has been a source of encouragement to both of us as we struggle to carry on, in our own little way, the work he started and taught for more than half a century. He writes: *....I thank you for the love and friendship you have shown me for so many years and for helping me so much. I know the Christ Child will help you both and love you in a special way for carrying on the work of SASAC and loving and helping His poor children.*" Both my wife and I are so grateful to Fr. Abraham and all the friends who supported his work for years. He/You picked us up from the slums, fed us and clothed us, educated us, trained us. You gave us a new life and I think that is what Christmas means. My wife and I in our turn, for the last seven years, have been trying to do just that -- re-living Christmas, trying to give new life to a few poor and destitute children. So thank you for helping me and my wife all those years when we were poor and destitute and for keeping us alive. Now, we not only can take care of our own two children well but also feed, clothe, educate and train nine other children and bring peace, joy and happiness to their world.



Sashi and Sudhir with Fr. Abraham

Having experienced poverty firsthand -- and all that is associated with poverty -- when a generous friend built a home for us, the first thing my wife and I did was go to remote villages looking for poor children who would share our home with us. In August 2008, we inaugurated our home, Chris



Our happy family

Niwas. Along with my family we took in nine poor children. These children, mostly between the ages of 7 and 11, were not going to school. The girls spent their time at home looking after their younger siblings while their parents spent their time either doing odd jobs or looking for jobs. The boys spent their time looking after the family cow or goats and collecting wood. It was quite a challenging job to convince the parents to allow us to take their children away from them for the academic school

year -- not only because they love them dearly but also because they would be losing a very valuable source of labour. But once we succeeded in convincing one family, the rest was easy. When these children came to us, I home-tutored them all for a whole year and then put them in regular schools. They are really performing well. Take for example Sujan. If we had not brought him with us to Chris Niwas, he would still be shepherding his cow and goats, not that there is anything wrong with that. But now he is one of the brightest students in his school, winning all sorts of trophies and



Sujan with his medals and certificates.

certificates not only in academics but also in sports and discipline. Strange what an extra dose of TLC can achieve! Another happy story is Sona. She is the eldest of three children. She is thirteen years old. She was officially a student of the village school but she rarely attended class. She had to look after her two younger siblings – cook for them, feed them, clean them, put them to sleep while her father went to the forest to cut down trees to sell them as fuel and the mother, who is very sickly, carried heavy loads on her feeble back to earn enough to bring food for the children. Sona has been now with us for two years. She is progressing well in studies and instead of being a ‘mother’ to her younger siblings she is a happy young girl with friends who are her own age. She is now in Grade 5. Sona’s mother now stays home to look after her two young children. Sona’s father works in construction sites and earns enough to feed the family. We now need to find support to send the two younger children to school.



Sona at home cooking, Sudhir & Patrick with Sona’s family outside their home, Sona studying at Chris Niwas

Besides the regular school education, we also train children in various activities like gardening, poultry-keeping, water recycling and involve them in tree-planting, picking garbage and its proper disposal. At Chris Niwas we do not have land for gardening. We use our little space on the terrace to grow vegetables. Each child owns ten recycled polythene bags which they use to grow vegetables like peas, beans, spinach, coriander, lettuce and some flowers too. We make our own organic compost. We are a long way from meeting our own vegetable needs but the children are super excited when we do cook the vegetables they have produced. From this year we also started raising chickens. We have already raised and sold two batches of ten chickens each and we are into our third batch. (Remember at SASAC we used to raise 10,000 layers at a time. We are only three zeroes away from reaching that number!). Besides the revenue the chickens bring, we also get another valuable product from them -- their droppings, which go into our organic compost. We have always tried to make our children aware of the problem of pollution of various kinds. So every week our children go around our village picking up and sorting garbage into things we can use for composting, things we can dispose ourselves safely, things we can recycle like broken buckets and containers which we can use to grow flowers or vegetables.



Sona & Andrew watering vegetables; Sujan feeding the chickens; children planting trees in Tumling



Fr. Abraham and me, when we were both young.

I am against child labour of any kind but I am 100% for engaging children in some meaningful manual work every day. Many things I am able to do now like teaching organic gardening to poor village farmers, teaching English to students of various grades, building homes, raising animals, making compost, caring for children I can do them because of the training I received since my childhood. Here I want to share my own little history of my journey with Father Abraham so that you know why we are trying to continue his work. I was four years old when Fr. Abraham discovered my family in one of the slums

of Kurseong. My three brothers and I were the first few students when Fr. Abraham began the Montessori Head Start School. When I was seven I started regular school at St. Alphonsus School, which was still under construction. At that same time I was part of the Work Scholarship Program through which we were given the opportunity to pay for our own education. Along with our textbooks we had to carry a little hammer to break stones before and after school and on weekends. When I was a little older, I learnt to make hollow blocks. The stone chips and hollow blocks went into building St. Alphonsus School and the homes that were being built in the land above the school. Once I reached Grade 5, I was promoted to SAS Poultry which was on the roof of the school building. My training started with hauling buckets of 'soolee' (chicken soolee) from the roof of the building to the compost pits way up in the mountain. As I got promoted to higher grades, I got moved to departments like Egg Cleaning Section, Feed Store, General Store, Chicken Hospital where I had to dissect a dead chicken and find out the cause of death and finally promoted as the captain of a group of students who were in charge

of 600 laying birds. I was involved with the marketing all through the training period -- first the local market in where we went selling eggs door-to-door and then big time marketing in Darjeeling where we were selling between ten to fifteen thousand eggs a day. I think my best education happened not in the classrooms but on the roof of the school with the chickens. Not only did I get the training in managing a financially viable chicken business but also to learn how to manage people. After I finished my Grade 10, I moved to SASAC with Father Abraham where I lived for twenty three years running departments like Piggery, Square Meter Garden, Public Relation Department, Village



Carrying stones for breaking; 6th on the line is me. (Get your microscope out!)



Training a group of farmers in Sikkim as part of our Village Outreach Program.

Outreach Program. Living and working with Fr. Abraham was better than attending the best universities of the world. The love and care we are giving to the poor children at Chris Niwas is our way of paying back to all those who loved and cared for us when we were in need. Hopefully the children we are caring for will carry on the tradition and will in their own way contribute to making the lives of the poor and needy people a little better.

To all my friends who have been supporting our effort for the last six years in various ways, I thank you in the name of my family and all the children we are caring for. We could not have done it without your support. To the friends who will be receiving our newsletter for the first time, I invite you to join our family and help us carry on the work for which Father Abraham devoted his whole life. Hopefully someday children like Sujan and Sona will send a newsletter sharing with your

children and grandchildren the legacy of Father Abraham. I send you all greetings of Peace, Joy and Love for the New Year.

Gratefully yours,

Sudhir Bhitrikoty
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