

**The East West Overseas Aid Foundation's
16th Annual Dinner Dance
Friday 24th of October 2008**

Speech by Megan Nutbean

INTRODUCTION

Hi everyone. I'm Megan Nutbean and I came back to Melbourne about four months ago after spending just under a year working for The East West Foundation of India in Alamparai – which is the area in India where our work is dedicated.

I first got involved in the Foundation just over three years ago, when I visited the Uluru Children's Home as a volunteer for two months.

At that stage I was mid-way through university and wanted a break. I was looking for an adventure and my volunteering stint at Uluru was part of a six-month trip around the world. I suppose my motivation for applying to volunteer with TEWFI was a desire to give something back rather than just travelling through developing countries as a cultural tourist. I think it also had something to do with a romantic idea of disadvantaged children that somewhere my presence as a 'Westerner' could assist these children. When I look back at that naive attitude now, I really do marvel at how fortunate I've been to learn a bit more humility and I hope understanding about the world through my first-hand experiences with the people I knew there.

When I first applied, I had no idea that my lovely mother, Judy, would end up accompanying me. The idea of spending 6 weeks sharing a rather tiny room with my mum didn't seem that crazy at the time... BUT... a few weeks in, after a prolonged period without water or electricity, some acute doxycycline-induced mood swings, several rather stressful encounters with local, venomous wildlife, things started to get more tense. It wasn't until mum drew a line down the centre of the room and sternly informed me that none of my belongings (that, admittedly, were strewn around the room) were permitted to cross to her side that I realized maybe it was just as hard on her.

THE DISPARITY BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL

One thing I remember being struck by on that first visit to India was the huge difference between urban and rural India. The physical distance between Chennai, which is India's third biggest city and the state-capital of Tamil Nadu, and Alamparai – which is the area in which TEWFI works – is only 110kms.

That's the distance between here, in South Yarra, and Portsea. Yet in terms of lifestyle, income, gender equality, child rights, educational opportunities and literacy, access to healthcare, maternal health, caste equality, - to me it really did seem like another world.

TEWFI's area of work is on the coast of Tamil Nadu, and our facilities are surrounded by a number of small fishing and farming villages. Our primary focus is on three fishing villages that are within a kilometre or two of the Health Care Centre – and these villages are isolated both physically and socially. The villages were strictly traditional – boys started fishing at the age of 5; girls start cooking and cleaning at a similar age. The only school in the area didn't teach beyond Grade Six with only 27% of local people are educated to high school level. The age-old disputes between and among the three villages often broke into confrontations and even violence. While traditionally these people had survived well on fishing, a range of factors had reduced the market for their fish, causing household financial stress, and a growing rate of alcoholism in local men has exacerbated the distress. The leader of one of the local youth groups TEWFI works with provides a typical case. We'll call him 'Vijay' and he started fishing at age 5 – this meant getting up to go fishing at 4am and getting dropped off at the beach at 9am to run to school. By the time he was 8 his father's alcoholism had got to the point where he was no longer able to work. It was at this point that Vijay took over as the breadwinner for the family. At age 20, when I'd met him, he'd been supporting his family for 12 years working hard to ensure his sisters could attend school so they could have the education he'd been denied.

With this alcoholism come really serious social problems like domestic violence, gambling, increased conflict between and within villages, and even suicide, which is particularly high among young men in that area. Also, many of the local people are in serious debt – with interest rates set by corrupt and wealthy locals so astronomically high such that few people can afford to meet payments. Life for the women is very difficult, as you can imagine and there are real inequalities in terms of educational opportunities, employment, access to healthcare, and much more.

To top it all off, the area was hit by the Indian Ocean Tsunami in December 2004. Although the immediate effects of this disaster weren't overly devastating to those villages, the longer-term effects have been unpredictable and far more damaging. I won't go into details here as obviously it's extremely complex, but let's just say that the alcoholism, the spouse abuse, and the violence between communities were some of the features *not* washed away by this natural disaster.

While my experience of India is extremely limited, in that I've rarely ventured far beyond the region TEWFI works in, national figures on health, literacy, gender equality, income and consumption indicate that this rural-urban disparity is vast across India

MY FIRST VISIT

At the time of my first volunteer placement, the Foundation's main focuses were on health care, long-term Tsunami relief, and child relief. The UHCC was the first primary health clinic in the area and the doctor and nurses were seeing huge numbers of patients every day. The waiting room was always full and there were quite often lines outside the door. I can't imagine what it must have been like before the centre opened... What I do know that is that 90% of the local population are aged below 45, and this is the impact on life expectancy the absence of health care has had.

On the first visit my time was divided between teaching English at the local primary school and time at the Uluru Children's Home.

A couple of days after arriving at Uluru I went down to the school to discuss the possibility of my teaching there during my time as a volunteer. Before I knew what was happening, I'd had a tattered English text-book thrust into my hand and was standing in front of a class of 50 children, sitting on a dirty floor, with another 10 at the back of the room facing the wall. As they all stared expectantly at me I, of course, panicked and somehow decided it was a good idea to dance and sing 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' in a small room with 60 rather excited children with whom I did not share any common language... After a couple of minutes of reasonably stunned faces staring at the giant white girl dancing around the room making weird movements and noises... I was saved from the ensuing chaos by a very amused headmaster.

It was my time at the primary school that I'd say really opened my eyes to the reality of life there. At that stage there were only three classrooms, yet there were six classes and well over 200 students. On average there were 2 or 3 teachers. I was told that many of the children came for the state-funded free lunch (which at that stage generally consisted of a bowl of boiled rice). There were no toilets, no safe drinking water, nor any desks, fans or play equipment. The yard was filled with rubbish and was often used as a drinking spot by local men in the night. The area was so poor that the single free uniform provided to the children was worn by many on the weekends and holidays too. Most of the children went home after the lunch and didn't return. Exams at the school consisted of teachers going between classrooms to write the questions on the blackboards... along with the corresponding answers. This resulted in all children passing and proceeding to the next class with only their copying skills at all advanced by this cynical exercise.

From what I hear, this is not uncommon in such under resourced schools. How a teacher could possibly stay motivated in this kind of environment is beyond me. But the effect is that state literacy rates get bumped up without reflecting the reality of the situation. A study by a large local NGO, AID India, found that 50% of Grade 5 children in rural Tamil Nadu could not read a paragraph in Tamil, while

70% could not solve a simple division problem. This is after five years of schooling. It's hard to imagine.

I think as a volunteer you go over with big ideas about making some kind of valuable contribution. Although I have happy memories from the time I spent with the students at the school – the joy and delight the children got in seeing a coloured texta or sheet of white paper for the first time, or actually being allowed to talk and sing in class – was eye-opening to say the least. However, two months at the school had left me feeling powerless and close to hopeless about the future of children attending this rather dismal little school.

My time at the children's home was a different story altogether. For those of you who don't know, the UCH – it is a home for orphaned, abandoned and destitute children. It provides them with the life-essentials of food, shelter, clothing, as well as education and quality health care. What they're fundamentally provided with, and what makes Uluru so unique, is a loving, family-like environment where their self-esteem and independence really is fostered. My time at the Home was constantly filled by a hoard of children screaming for attention from the volunteers. The children's home really was a noisy place at that time, and for the five of us young uni student volunteers I think it was safe to say our romantic ideas of children needing quiet attention in the form of stories, cuddles and lullabies were very quickly dashed. Pretty soon the only sounds breaking up the constant collective volume of 26 rather wild children was the half-mad Aunties who screaming the single words we'd learnt in Tamil to survive the chaos: "Stop!", "Quiet!", "Give it to me!", and "Go away!". I know I pretty much gave up on the idea of having children then and there!

That said, it was the most amazing and life-changing experience I imagine I will ever experience. It's hard for people who haven't spent much time to understand how quickly you feel part of the place, a passion for work the Foundation is doing and a genuine love and respect for the children of Uluru, our wonderful staff, and the people of the local community. I've left there four times now, and each time it gets harder to leave not knowing when I'll be back.

I suppose this is what lead me to part-time work with Dr. Chandran and ongoing volunteer work with the Foundation when I got back to Australia, which I did for a couple of years. The close connection I felt with the place kept me motivated during this time, and as I worked there I became increasingly interested in working to improve the education in the area. While TEWFI had been focusing on health care and, to a limited extent, child relief for many years in the area, it was noticed by many there that there was a huge gap in education. A group of volunteers in Melbourne worked to increase the focus on Education and within a fairly short time I was given the amazing opportunity to go and spend a longer period at Uluru and to work with staff to direct some of this energy towards Education initiatives on the ground.

GOOD TIMES

It's hard to put into words what an amazing experience this was for me. It was challenging, lonely and very frustrating time (and have to send a ginormous thanks to my mum for keeping me sane through this). Yet it was also the most wonderful time. I got so much joy from my life there. I thought I'd share a few of my favourite times:

- Riding my bike to pick up kids from school in the evenings with a rather enormous house carer on the bike were possibly my favourite times. We're barely understood a word each other said yet we'd literally be laughing and chattering the whole way to school – when I wasn't falling off the bike with exhaustion.
- The 'Hokey Pokey'. Some of you in the room may have experienced the absolute delight the children at the Home got from doing this dance – it never ceased to amaze me. I don't think I ever got tired of it, despite the fact that we generally had to do it 20 times in a row several times a week, just to see the happiness in their faces.
- Being invited to meals with staff and other people from the community was brilliant. The hospitality and generosity of people who materially have almost nothing compared to me... as they invited all their neighbours to meet you and climbed to the tops of coconut trees to supply you with endless fresh coconuts and cooked two or three kinds of meat which would certainly be out of their budgets... Needless to say these were quite humbling experiences.
- The bus rides. All bus rides in India are an adventure but bus rides with 36 ecstatic children on board is a different thing altogether. Some of you in this room been on them – on the several occasions the children of UCH were sponsored to go on outings. Tamil Bollywood songs up full bore with 40 people dancing Bollywood style in the aisles as the bus navigates crazy Indian traffic at rather high speeds is a spectacle not to be missed!
- Any time spent with the local youth groups was amazing and inspiring. I got to teach community English classes with groups of local youth who had, for one reason or another, left school early. The desire to learn and sense of fun of these was so inspiring, as was their passion for working together towards a positive future for their villages. The young man, Vijay, I spoke about earlier was the leader of one of these youth groups and definitely one of the most passionate. Vijay and others like him, who'd witnessed their families struggle through financial hardship and paternal alcoholism, spoke with such determination about preventing patterns of alcohol abuse continuing into their generation.

- The Sunday bachelor hunt was always fun, although it did take me a few Sundays to realise what was going on. Towards the end of my stay I'd be invited to all kinds of events and lunches and it was demanded by the women at Uluru that I dress up in my finest sari and told not to wear my hair "ugly" and they'd all decorate me in their nice gold jewellery (as opposed to my "ugly" silver). I finally got told they were looking for a husband for me which was both amusing and slightly terrifying.
- Being allowed to participate in a women's auto-rickshaw driving class run by one of our social workers was certainly an experience – after several near crashes I have even more respect for those insane Chennai auto drivers who zip between monster trucks at a million miles an hour.

When I look back now it's obvious that I'm the one who gained the most from the experience. What I learnt from the inspiring people I worked with there I hope I will never forget. Most of all, the inspiring women at the Uluru Children's Home whose strength, resilience and ability to love and to laugh in spite of so much trauma and loss in their lives, is still incomprehensible to me. It was just such a privilege to be able to share their lives for a while.

THREE YEARS OF DIFFERENCE!

One of the most wonderful changes I've been fortunate enough to observe in the three years is the remarkable difference in the independence of the children at UCH. Three years ago they needed constant attention and absolutely fought over it from the volunteers. At that stage, considering my limited ability to contribute at the school, I felt my contribution was almost entirely limited to being able to provide this to the children. The wonderful thing about today is that the kids literally don't need me. With such a wonderful team of dedicated staff, and with so much positive stuff going on in their lives (like karate, and music and dance classes, and environment camps, and the occasional opportunity to go out and see world outside Kadapakkam), the need for volunteers at Uluru has sharply diminished – surely a testament to what has been achieved there.

Other changes have been equally remarkable. We were able to employ two community social workers last year and now have a huge range of programs like vocational training for local youth, income generation projects for local women's groups, alcoholism counselling, HIV education programs, local sporting programs to improve relations between communities, and so much more.

We have a team of education staff now, working at the children's home and in the community. There are now toilets, fans, desks and play equipment at the school. There are new classrooms, new teachers, a new fence, computers, a kitchen... it's come a long way.

Thanks to the tireless work to our friends at Engineers Without Borders Australia and the generosity of the wonderful Vicki Standish, we now have the most amazing IT Education Centre next to the children's home. Local children and youth flock to the centre on weekends and holidays for their computer classes, with the Uluru children having daily classes. It was so inspiring to see the short-term effect this had in the community. With these increased educational opportunities people are starting to see education as a positive way of securing their futures, in light of the decreasing viability of fishing as source of income.

People sometimes ask why they should give money and assistance overseas when there's so much need in Australia. I think this is a very personal thing but I suppose my feeling here is that it's our responsibility. In a globalised world where we're happy to call up our local Indian take-away, or go to yoga class, or go on fantastic overseas holidays where we get to experience different cultures, or buy clothes that have been manufactured by people earning the tiniest of wages in a developing country... it has to be reciprocal. I believe that in Western, developed countries like Australia we have an obligation to at least be aware of the reality of people's lives in places like Alamparai, if not make some kind of contribution.

Anyway, I'm probably preaching to the converted since you're all here in the first place. Many people in room are already long-term supporters of TEWOAF. And you all deserve thanks for, whether by donations of time, money or both, having made all this a possibility. I'm not going to go into details, because you all know who you are. Of course none of us would be here without one person in particular – and that's Chandran. I think very few people have the vision and determination to make such remarkable achievements in so short a time – it's really been such a privilege to work for you Chandran – you really are an inspiration.

