

On small miracles and a Saturday ...

February 26, 2000. REDWOOD CITY, California. It's an unusual Saturday morning and six small miracles are taking shape yet again. A group of about 40 volunteers is assembled at a construction site of the Peninsula Habitat For Humanity (HFH) where six community homes are being built for low-income families. It's a couple of minutes past 9:00, and a last group of volunteers rushes in through the gate. Slightly out of breath and just in time for the mandatory safety meeting before everyone is assigned work.

For HFH this Saturday is like any other. Nothing unusual. What is unusual is really this last group of 10 silicon-valley professionals who are from the Bay Area chapter of the Association for India's Development (AID). Also accompanying them are 9 youth from the Indo-American Community Service Center's (ICSC) SEVA program.

Why is this group here? Is it because a few weeks ago Sam Rao, AID volunteer and ICSC's Executive Director, challenged them into doing real community service? Into building relationships with other groups and working with the Center? Or is it inspiration from the Ann Arbor chapter's positive experience of volunteering for HFH? Who knows ...

Today they are here due to the efforts of Neerja Bhatt, the group's leader who did all the planning and scheduling. Curiosity and interest of the individuals took care of the rest.

The day's work begins with a healthy dose of humility. None of these "professionals" have qualified as "skilled" in any of the construction related tasks. "Never mind we can use all the help we can get. Many hands make light work," they're told. The group is split into manageable chunks and assigned to a team-leader. Everyone picks up work gloves and heads off to work. Karuna has volunteered to learn and use power tools. Savita joins a group that going to install a bath-tub. Sam and the SEVA group head off to plaster and smoothen walls with "mud". Aradhana, Gokul, Prashanti, Laxmikant and Neerja are assigned to the site cleaning crews. Bharat and Aniruddha are sent off to look for an extensible ladder. Their task is to untangle a hose from a 25 foot high roof.

Soon the site is buzzing with activity. Power saws sound their steady drone. Six garages and the construction site are getting cleaned as litter is carted away in wheel-barrows. Nails are pried loose from old boards and are picked up with a magnetic nail trap. Inside the houses, bath-tubs are being fitted, walls are being scraped smooth and pink "mud" plastered over white patches.

The sun is out and three hours fly quickly. Lunch time! Everyone looks like they need it. Savita has been scraping walls and the ceiling. You can tell from the white dust on her hair. A quick wash and then lunch is served. Served on the sidewalk under the shade of a tree. Neerja and Prashanti's cheese and mint-chutney sandwiches followed by some bananas, prunes and dates. Gokul is up to some antics. Jokes and laughter follow and it's time to get back to work.

In the afternoon everyone gets a "promotion". Bharat is installing sewer-pipe covers, using spirit-levels and packing clay around the pipe. The "cleaning crew" is now indoors scraping uneven surfaces on walls and plastering the pink mud. Through

the course of the day, the construction site looks much cleaner and the work more organized than the morning.



Photo: Neerja Bhatt (left) working with community volunteers

Conversation with Max and Mario, two of our team leaders, reveals that work began at this site about six months ago. It's a middle-class neighborhood. Pretty. With small houses and neat little gardens. Some have citrus trees laden with fruit. Come May and the houses on the site will be ready to be handed to the families. Six houses which have been built largely through the work of volunteer groups not unlike the groups here today. In a nice little neighborhood there'll be six small miracles.

The day's work is done. The volunteers are washing up. Putting away the tools they used. Waving good-byes with tired bodies but exhilarated spirits.

There are many lessons that are learned today. On building communities. On the dignity of labor. On humility. On the pleasures of a simple meal in the shade by the sidewalk. On team-building and living up to a challenge.

And on making small miracles happen. One day at a time.
-Aniruddha Vaidya, AID-San Francisco Bay Area

News and Events

AID US Conference 2000: May 27-29 at Boston, hosted by AID-Boston. For further information, contact Payal (pparekh@mit.edu) or Shrinaath (860)290-8771. Details will soon be available at <http://www.aidboston.org>

AID - State College presents Taste of India. The chapter will organize its second annual food-festival featuring a sampling of cuisine from different parts of India. The occasion will be used to showcase AID's past activities and projects. The new issue of the chapter's newsletter *Sankalp* will also be released on the same day.

April 16, 2000 (11am - 3pm) Information/tickets contact Vithal at (814)-237-6480. (<http://www.clubs.psu.edu/aid>).

AID-Cincinnati presents Annamayya An Indian dance ballet featuring Dr. Saraswati and troupe. Special appearance by Dr. Balamurali Krishna.

April 29, 2000, 5:30pm at College Theater, College of Mount Saint Joseph. Tickets/Information: (513) 556-7418

Power Play

Abhay Mehta's book "Power Play: A Study of the Enron Project" has arrived to rave reviews. To order a copy of the book in the US contact the AID Boston chapter.

Minnesota's Aksharotsav



Photo: Scene from the play "Waiting For the Dawn"

The Minnesota chapter hosted the fourth edition of its annual event *Aksharotsav*. AID volunteers presented an hour long play called *Waiting for the Dawn*. A lecture series has also been launched. Every Tuesday evening, a fresh topic is explored at a Anderson Hall, University of Minnesota. Topics range from 'The rise of Hindu nationalism' to 'Experiments in microcredit'. Another sustained facet of AID-MN has been *shramdaan*. Our effort continues at the Minnesota Twins games.

-Sanat Mohanty, AID-Minnesota

Study and struggle in the submergence zone ...

Fine soil particles which rivers normally carry with them as they flow accumulate as metres-deep silt when a dam obstructs this flow. Silt acts like quicksand, making life's daily activities of washing, bathing, fishing and collecting drinking water impossible for those who live on the banks of Narmada. In fact two people were caught in the silt during the recent monsoon and died. To provide some respite to this problem, Narmada Nav Nirman Samiti has installed a pedal pump, purchased from Modern Technical Company in Pune. Placing the bicycle at a level where the silt has dried, villagers can pump water through a hose by piping. Saves long walks to find ground solid enough to approach Narmada waters. Here Ravi, Shobha and residents of Domkhedi pump water.

When the silt dries, standing on it is not only possible but fascinating. Students of Reva Jeevanshala, Nimgavhan explored the terrain, cracked in fractal formation into large polygon surfaces. Skipping from chunk to chunk, each student closely examined the cracks and peeled the surface, jigsaw-puzzle style. Tiny patterns in different colours dotted the surface and the sides of the chunks. Shobha of Malegaon, working in the jeevanshalas, compared the silted ground to the earth's surface and showed the children how the continents also fit together like a puzzle. Meanwhile the children burrowed through the layers of silt and discovered the ultra smooth layer a few inches below. They began writing on this velvety surface with their fingers! Such holistic learning is a hallmark of the Reva Jeevanshalas, run by the Narmada Bachao Andolan since 1991.

-Aravinda, AID-Mumbai



(Photo: Jeevanshala students are involved in holistic learning)

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