

Mercy mission inspires 'hope' among 'slum people' of India

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A REMARKABLE group of Good Samaritans from Hollywood has been continuing their tireless efforts on behalf of a charity which works in some of the worst slums in India.

The dedicated volunteers from Hollywood Parish Church have been praised for their invaluable contribution over several years now for a good cause called 'Asha' which means hope in Hindi.

Now their efforts have been boosted by the arrival of a new Rector at neighbouring Glencraig Parish Church in Seahill, Rev Simon Richardson and his wife Moyra.

For Moyra has just returned from a 10-day working visit to the charity's centres in Delhi with a group of nine A Level students from Wallace High School Lisburn, where she is a teacher.

The team went to Delhi under the auspices of Hollywood based Friends of Asha (Ireland), which now has many volunteers among seven teams across the province.

Their contribution over the years has greatly assisted in the ongoing medical and educational projects of Asha and particularly in the Zakhira slum of New Delhi.

The charity was founded some 25 years ago by an Indian paediatrician called Dr Kiran Martin, who has been

dubbed the 'Mother Teresa of New Delhi' for her incredible work among the city's poorest people.

Amazingly the charity helps give hope to almost 500,000 of the four million so called 'slum people' in India's capital city with the help of its support groups across Northern Ireland, including Hollywood.

And as Moyra explained the trip she recently embarked upon after 14 months of team-building, fundraising and inoculations left all 13 of its participants 'well and truly challenged.'

Beforehand they had been left 'buzzing with anticipation' by the important advance preparation on critical issues like the perils of Delhi's drinking water, packs of wild dogs and monkeys and holy cows.

But nothing could have prepared them for the scenes that greeted them upon their arrival ready to roll their sleeves up and indulge in the charity work inspired by Dr Kiran Martin.

Said Moyra, "Our allotted slum, Mayapuri, is based in an industrial area of factories and scrap metal breakage yards. Our first sight of the slum was marked by the mounds of discarded rubbish and the stripped carcasses of cars, vans and tuk tuks.

"The grease and grime was thickly ingrained in the hands and faces of the men stripping back car chassis and reclaiming every available wire from circuit boards.

"But the most shocking sight was the small, shoeless children, armed with magnets on sticks, crouched and picking through the fetid refuse,



Team spirit! Moyra and her team enjoy a relaxing moment with some of the children they are helping.

scavenging any morsel of metal to be sold and melted, bringing a small income to their family.

"These dirty-faced youngsters raced to meet the Western faces descending from the cars, flashing beautiful wide smiles, holding out little hands to be shaken and asking for photographs to be snapped and shown.

Our nine students in clean, Indian-styled salwar kameeze embraced the children, moved by their open welcome and warm greetings. This was our first lesson in the community-building power of the values expounded by Asha."

Moyra said the hope reflected in the name of the charity Asha was the overwhelming feeling that the participants experienced throughout their 10-day trip.

She recalled about the charity's work, "The Asha resource centre in Mayapuri delivers pre and post-natal healthcare to all people in the slum.

"They fund a full-time trained nurse, the tireless and gutsy Thresi, to work with and to train Community Health Volunteers, to deliver inoculations to each child, to prescribe antibiotics and to oversee the general health of the entire community.

"Even the children are trained to identify the symptoms and to treat with home-made remedies any diarrhoea-related illnesses. This has had such an impact on the slum that there have been no diarrhoea-related deaths there for three years.

"ASHA has been working in Mayapuri for 23 years and on our first day at the resource centre, we were

invited to listen to the Mahila Mandal, the women's pressure group.

"The charity structures these groups, training women and children, the Bal Mandal groups, to find a political voice to canvass their local government for improvements in infrastructure and facilities in their local area."

But sometimes it is the provision of the most basic facilities which have been uppermost in the minds of the charity workers, for example toilets, of which there were none in the entire slums 23 years ago.

Said Moyra, "The ladies covered their faces with veils and had to relieve themselves in the public park where factory workers would molest them.

"Thanks to the work of Asha, the ladies have succeeded in pressuring local government to build public toilets with running water. The ladies now feel safe to walk with faces uncovered and to go about basic hygiene routines unbothered and with dignity."

Another big issue has been to teach English to the slum-dwellers, particularly its youngest inhabitants, a task the pupils on the trip set about eagerly with worksheets, flashcards, posters, and great enthusiasm.

Added Moyra, "The Mayapuri children were like knowledge sponges. Their faces lit up when we gave them a pencil and a yellow exercise book in which to keep their notes.

"They are so happy with so little, a sobering lesson to us as we live with such wealth, waste and excess.

"We also taught the children new

games. Wink, murder and dodge ball were top favourites, taught them some songs and delivered arts and crafts lessons. Loom bands have finally hit Delhi, thanks to WHS.

"But for all of our input into the lives of these children, we have gained so much more in return.

"The generosity, contentment and determination of the adults and children working with Asha, to build a better future for themselves, their families and their community is inspiring and humbling.

"Tarun is one of over 800 university students that Asha is supporting through their studies this year. He is in his third year of a Business Studies degree and hopes to save enough to start his own printing press business in Mayapuri.

"His father is a printing press operator and earns around the average for a Delhi slum dweller, £150 a day. Tarun wants to employ his father and other slum dwellers and pay them a fair wage, thus helping to raise the living standards of his community.

"This is the testimony of the work of this charity. This is the testimony that we want to share. This is the recipe for a life well lived in the spirit of ASHA, the spirit of hope."

The charity can be contacted at: ashaireland@mail.com or through its website: asha-india.org

Contact www.hollywoodparishchurch.co.uk/delhi to find out how church members got on during recent working trips to the slum children and young people.



Happy days! The Hollywood charity has put a smile on 'slum' children's faces.