

## **PROJECT: Develop Music Instructors to Cultivate Slum Children's Self-reliance**

**PROJECT PERIOD: January 2011-December 2013**

### **If music be the food of love, play on...**

Unlike boys of his age, Mohit Gopal Varma, 14, has a long hard day ahead of him, everyday. His day starts early at 6 at the *sabzi mandi* (vegetable market) where he helps his uncle set up his fruit shop. In the afternoon he goes to the local municipal school to attend classes. Post-school, he is back at the market where he works alongside his uncle from 7 to 11 pm. The thirty rupees that he earns each day goes to support the tuition classes of his four younger siblings.



But there is one time of his day that he looks forward to – between his morning work and afternoon school. That's the time he spends at Mumbai's Acworth Municipal Hospital with Yuri Nishimura and other members of Hikari no Onpu or SurDeep (as known in Hindi), a Japan based NGO that teaches children music, dance and creative arts as a means of self-expression.

*Mohit is his happiest at SurDeep. Photo credit: Swati Sahi/ OneWorld*

SurDeep or 'The Musical Notes of Light', run by the effervescent Yuri, has been helping slum children in Mumbai's Wadala area since 2004 in creative educational pursuits. Now supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) since January 2011, it aims to cultivate their self-reliance through the power of music and dance in partnership with local NGO, the Bombay Leprosy Project (BLP).

### **A 'miraculous' bond**

Yuri Nishimura describes her relationship with India as "miraculous". Yuri first came to India in 2002 to bury her mother's ashes next to her father's grave at Agra. Her father, a leprosy doctor, had worked at Agra's National JALMA Institute for 13 years.

This was when she witnessed the plight of street children in Mumbai, especially those whose parents were affected by leprosy – out of schools, mostly begging on streets.

Yuri, a trained music teacher, had been working with handicapped children and the aged in Japan. SurDeep, the NGO founded by her, was based on the percept that providing the experience of articulation is the beginning of education, and music and its healing power can here play a strong role.

She realised these street children needed to be educated – and her music could help give them a chance to connect 'emotionally' with society.



Yuri discussed the possibilities of imparting this emotional education with the late Dr. Ganapathy, the then director of BLP and a close friend of Yuri's father. He connected her with Sister Seraphin who had been running the Monsoon classes for Wadala's street children for over two decades. Most of the children had leprosy affected parents, and

*A child enjoys a clapping game with Yuri. Photo credit: Satish Nagaraji/ OneWorld*

belonged to the tribal community living under the railway bridge.

With strong passion and belief in her work, Yuri managed to mobilise resources from Japan to start her work in Mumbai in 2004. Over time she tied up with the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to bring in music and dance instructors to her project to help the children cultivate self-reliance, confidence and hope.

### **All song and play in a day's work**

It's Thursday morning and a small room on the grounds of Acworth Municipal Hospital is packed with 40 excited children. "One little, two little, three little Indians," they sing along with Rommel D'Souza, the music instructor who has been teaching them to play the keyboard since the past four months.

"We practice English songs so that it is easier for them to pick up the language," he says.

Rommel was introduced to SurDeep by Project Manager Subhash Hoval of BLP, a steady supporter of Yuri's efforts. He now loves his work; the children are quick, eager and attentive. Their love and uninhibited enthusiasm to learn has been both motivating and rewarding for him.

"The children are gaining confidence to sing. They are experiencing new things that their peers don't have," Rommel says, hopeful that the children will gain through this experience.



*Feroz's hands fly on the small drum as Mohit sings along. Photo credit: Swati Sahi/ OneWorld*

After the class, Firoz Sheik, 14, gets busy on the *dholak* (drum) as Sister Seraphin watches on with Yuri. She is pleased that the children are doing well and smiles delightedly at the children's performance.

Vikram Tikkam, 19, aka Chunku, as he is affectionately called by the children, is an ex-student of SurDeep. "I am glad I got a chance to study here. It helped me stay on track and take the right steps," he says as he fondly recalls his past six years. And now he helps Feroz, Mohit and others to practice their dance steps taught by dance instructor Brian Fernandes every Tuesday.



*Yuri Nishimura with Sister Seraphin. Photo credit: Satish Nagaraji/ OneWorld*

"This is a good platform for the children. They are so happy that they are learning to dance, play the keyboard and sing songs – something that we never used to do at their age," he says.

Brian, one of Mumbai's most popular dance instructors, has been associated with the project since the last six months. He believes the children are talented and with better training, can get to use their skills for their future. "Infrastructure, space is an issue," he says. "We also need to give them incentives so that the progress is sustained."



Brian is keen to put up a show with the children in November and in March, next year. "Music and dance help children forget pain. It can mellow their aggression and frustration," he says, noting that many of the street kids come from difficult conditions.

### **Creating joy**

As the class gets over, the children rush to the kitchen to hot piping food.

*Kusum takes a bite of her meal. Photo credit: Swati Sahi/ OneWorld*

The free midday meal is popular among the children as they fill themselves up, ready now for their afternoon classes at the municipal school. “The meals relieve their parents to some extent as many of them cannot afford to feed their large families,” says Sister Seraphin.

Creative arts teacher Carmine Fernandes has been working with Sister Seraphin for the last twenty years. “The number of our children has increased with their joy,” she says smiling, having noted a steady growth in their turnout with the project.

And it’s not just about the song and dance. Kusum, 9, who is taught Urdu at the local school, is learning new languages – English and Hindi at SurDeep. She enjoys her drawing classes and is not shy of shaking a leg during Brian’s classes.

Yuri Nishimura is most satisfied when she sees Kusum and others like her opening up to new possibilities. Poor children in India are not unhappy, but unlucky, she believes. “I hope my small efforts can bring a change in the world,” she says with great hope and humility.

Her loving rapport with the children is most evident as they hug her goodbye and shake her hand at the end of day. Her eyes are bright with delight as they express their thanks, “*Arigatō, arigatō*” in Japanese. And she can’t wait to get back to her work the next day.

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