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Future bright for young outcasts

Local group comes to aid of orphanage in India

By Amanda O'Rourke
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LEWISBURG — When Saumya arrived at the Snehibhavan orphanage in Kerala, India, she was known as the sad one.

The daughter of an Indian sex worker, Saumya believed she would always be standing at someone else's sink, but thanks to fundraising by the Jackfruit Project for Snehibhavan, a Lewisburg-based charity, Saumya was able to attend carpentry school.

"I have a picture of her now with a big smile on her face," said Paula Closson Buck, founder of the Jackfruit Project and an assistant professor of English at Bucknell University.

Buck founded the Jackfruit Project for Snehibhavan, a project of the Association for India's Development, or AID, of Lewisburg, after visiting the southern region of India in 2007 on a writing trip.

Since its inception, Buck and her small group of Lewisburg area sponsors have raised \$25,000. She hopes an online auction hosted by the Canadian Embassy Officer's Club will push the orphanage toward its goal of self-sufficiency.

Bleak futures



Photo provided Paula Closson Buck, president of the Association for India's Development, or AID, of Lewisburg, and co-founder of the Jackfruit Project, poses with the Snehibhavan orphanage family and friends.



Photo provided Saumya was the first of the girls at Snehibhavan to enter a training program. She learned carpentry at the Archana Women's Center.



Above, Daisy, a longtime resident of Snehibhavan, prepares jackfruit for a midday meal. At left, Saumya, one of the first girls to enter a training program, shows the carpentry she learned at the Archana Women's Center.



Robert Inglis/The Daily Item Paula Closson Buck, of Lewisburg, stands by a picture that was given to her. Robert Inglis

Buck was first drawn to the small orphanage by an acquaintance while on the writing trip to India. Her first visit to the orphanage found it in a state of crisis.

"The girls at the home were coming of age and didn't have any sense of any future," Buck said. "The fear of the director was that she didn't know what to tell them."

Most of the children were born of parents involved in India's sex trade. Known as Dalit, an Indian caste, the girls and young women traditionally are regarded as outcasts with little hope for a successful future.

While the caste system has been abolished in India, there still is discrimination and prejudice against Dalits in South Asia.

"The fear was that the cycle would continue," Buck said. "And that was the last thing the founder of the orphanage wanted."

A plan takes shape

Run by an Indian woman, Sajini, a Dalit herself, and her laborer husband, Matthews, the orphanage was barely surviving on the little income brought in by Matthews' wages, Buck said.

"They needed money for food. They were surviving on bags of rice that neighbors gave them," Buck said. "They didn't have anything to sleep on."

Sajini appealed to Buck to help them, which is exactly what she did.

That very night, Buck and her friend drafted a plan that would allow the orphanage to become self-sufficient, and the Jackfruit Project for Snehibhavan was born.

Snehibhavan mean "love home," Buck said, and AID Lewisburg is the umbrella organization under which the Jackfruit Project exists. The project is named after a wooded grove of jackfruit trees that grows behind the Snehibhavan home.

The first money raised went toward basic operating expenses, food, clothing and school books, as well as sleeping pads and blankets.

"In the first year, we built a water harvesting system," Buck said. "We accomplished lots of things. We helped them add onto their facility and complete a big multipurpose room, which is now where they eat and sleep."

Today, plans call for the orphanage to purchase a plot of land rich with latex-producing rubber trees so that the orphanage can support itself rather than rely on foreign donors.

"We don't think it's at all desirable for them to remain so dependent on us," Buck said.

An unlikely ally

Enter the Canadian Embassy Officer's Club, an unlikely ally for the Jackfruit Project, Buck admits.

Every year, the club chooses a foreign charity to support through an online auction, and this year, the Jackfruit Project was fortunate enough to benefit.

Buck said her group was found through a simple online search of charities.

The auction is open through Thursday at www.aidindia.org/auction, Buck said, with a goal of raising \$25,000.

Money raised through the auction will help to support young women like Daisy, the daughter of an Indian sex worker.

Daring to dream

When Buck first sought to raise money for the orphanage, she did so through sponsorships, and Arlene Hoyt, of Lewisburg, sponsored Daisy for \$362 a year.

With Hoyt's help, Daisy was able to leave her abusive past by earning a degree as a medical technician. Hoyt was drawn to the Jackfruit Project not only by the immediacy of the work being done there and the project's goal of self-sufficiency, but also by its larger mission.

"It was very gratifying to think that one life could be changed, and then she'll go on and change other lives, so then there will be a nice ripple effect," Hoyt said.

In Saumya's case, fundraising by the Jackfruit Project allowed her to go to carpentry school and meet her husband. They hope to open their own carpentry business — a life that would have been unimaginable for many Dalits.

When Buck last visited Saymya, it was while the young woman was making headboards for beds.

"She told us at that time," Buck said, "that she never dreamed that there would be anything like that in her future."

Said Hoyt: "I really appreciate the fact that I think we're trying to empower these young women to lead different lives."

n E-mail comments

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