

My reflections on 2 months with Sylvia Wright

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Earlier this year I was privileged to be able to visit the Rangammal Memorial School in South India, a school for hearing impaired children, founded and run by Sylvia Wright. As many people will know, some 35 years ago Sylvia sold up her home and all her possessions, and left Leeds to help the disadvantaged in India. In the years since, she has established a hospital employing 300 or so staff: a nursing college: a centre for severely disabled children: and a boarding school for around 200 children suffering varying degrees of hearing impairment including many who are profoundly deaf. Sylvia is a remarkable woman with a remarkable story. My little bit was to spend time helping in the School doing whatever I could.

Before going, I was somewhat nervous as I am not a teacher and have never filled the role of classroom assistant. I had no experience, no qualifications, only a little knowledge of sign language, and knew nothing of their own language. I was also uneasy about the thought of spending so much time away from home and feared that the 2 months might seem an awful long time while I was there.

I had visited India as a tourist so knew something of the richness of the colour, the noise and smells that awaited me on arriving at Chennai Airport with lovely Mary Crotty, a former St Mary's student from Burley on Wharfedale, who I had only met briefly on a couple of occasions before this trip. My fears about everything quickly vanished as the children in the School literally swamped us with the warmth of their welcome! They were so excited and throughout the entire stay filled our lives with their smiles, their joyfulness, and their overwhelming sense of simply wanting to be around us. If you were talking to some children to your left, a child on your right would put her hand on your cheek and turn your face towards hers. It was so moving.

The teachers too were so kind, even cooking meals at home which they would bring into school for us.

It's hard to imagine but all the children really did seem happy all the time. They were enthusiastic to learn, always interested to know about us, and always pleased to see us as we visited the different class groups. Children would look after us so well at mealtimes, insisting on fetching us a drink or something extra to eat. They always wanted to spend time with us, often just sitting quietly in our room with us. Most mornings they would bring us a flower for us to wear in our hair.

One day I was sitting on the ground in the sun watching the boys play cricket. Without saying a word, one boy came across, went into the School, brought out a chair, and placed it in the shade for me. I thought about how he had communicated his care for me without using any language at all. I was struck by the fact that caring for each other doesn't need language, whether you are hearing or not. I have been to Lourdes many times with HCPT and have seen this same sense of love and care that somehow crosses all languages and none.

I was able to spend some time with Sylvia herself who was pleased to talk about the changes that had been made over the years. I found her very unassuming, as if what she had achieved was no big deal! As if anybody would do it! I felt quite honoured to be in her presence. There is a lovely new Centre being built for the severely disabled children but meanwhile the volunteers have made the

existing, slightly dilapidated, premises very attractive with paint and posters on the walls. The children there were full of smiles and really enjoying playing together. In her very simplistic way, Sylvia said "All you need is four walls and a roof".

I make no apology for admitting to tears when I left for the return journey home. I felt very sad to leave those children as I had felt so privileged to have been part of their lives for the past 8 weeks. And they a part of mine. I worried about what would become of them when they have to leave school. For some they will have known nothing else from the age of about 4 to 18. They will leave the care and security of that wonderful environment to go into the outside world that is largely a "hearing world", and I worried about how they would cope.

When I returned, 2 planes and 24 hours after leaving India, I was back in Otley and everything was just the same. For a few days that troubled me. But then I realised that to everyone else, nothing has changed. But have I? I'm still asking myself that question. I went partly because it was important for me to have time just for me. That sounds strange when I was immersed totally in a school of 200 children, but it meant I didn't want too many texts from friends back home. In other words with as few distractions as possible. I was able to properly see and fully appreciate how happy those children are with what they have... their very few material things and all of them with a very real disability too. I quickly came to a greater appreciation of what I have, and how lucky I am. In fact within days of coming back, I was flying off again, this time to Lourdes.

If anyone is thinking of volunteering to go out there as I did, I would say you have to be prepared to throw yourself into it. Just accept things for what they are. You have to make do. Luxuries like showers might have to wait until you get back! And don't worry if you're not academic, you're without a string of GCSE's, or a degree. The children there, just like the disabled at Lourdes, don't care one bit! It's far more about how much love and laughter you can bring. And with children like I experienced in India, you can be sure they'll bring loads too!