

Giving them a new lease of life

President of India Dr APJ Abdul Kalam counsels all PIO's "First you must perform your duties for your adopted country. But remember you have an umbilical connection with India. We have a mission and you can be part of it. We want to make India prosperous, happy and safe by 2020." Working towards his vision are Melbourne-based Drs Chitra and Natteri Chandran says **Amita Sarwal**



Dr Natteri Chandran, Founder and Chairperson of The East West Foundation of India (TEWFI) with his wife Dr Chitra with kids from the Uluru (Australian aboriginal name for Ayers Rock) Children's Home

It is a sunny, mid-October afternoon as we drive from Chennai to Pondicherry on the sea-hugging East Coast Road, fronting palm-trees studded sandy beaches, and the Bay of Bengal beyond. Passing a colony of thatched huts, our host Dr Natteri Chandran, Founder and Chairperson of The East West Foundation of India (TEWFI) informs us that this is the temporary post-tsunami accommodation.

Further, he points to the Buckingham Canal, a slender water body, "which was our 'saviour' during the 2004 tsunami. These backwaters took the brunt of the waves

otherwise our home (Uluru Children's Home) would definitely have been wiped out."

Why Uluru? "It is the obvious Australia-India connection", continues his wife Chitra, a Consultant Paediatrician. "Coincidentally, the aboriginal name of the famous Ayers Rock in Australia is 'Uluru', and in Tamil the word means 'land deep inside'."

Chandran, the genial, salt-and-pepper haired Psychotherapist and Educator at Melbourne University, is evidently devoted to his cause. His social conscience has been 'alert' since his youth. While in college he was secretary of the

Pondicherry Students Association and when he moved to Australia in 1971 continued sending money back home to his father who worked with leprosy research, and to fund a schizophrenia care and research centre. To sustain these commitments Chandran raised awareness and funds as a teaching associate at Melbourne University. "I realised if I could get more people involved, obviously our contribution towards the disadvantaged in India would be greater. With this in mind I set up TEWFI in 1992."

About 125kms south of Chennai and

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46kms north of Pondicherry, we take a sharp left turn off the well-paved road, and drive through Kadapakkam village halting briefly at the Uluru Health Care Centre (UHCC). Chandran continues: “TEWFI started this clinic in 1998 and since then it continues to be the only primary health care facility catering to over 15,000 farming and fishing communities of Kadapakkam and Alampara.”

Dr G Selvam, young and enthusiastic, runs UHCC assisted by two nurses. He says: “We provide free health care to an average of 60 patients daily, the majority being women and children. We have basic laboratory facilities for clinical testing, but need to get HIV detection kits.”

We turn into Kamala Avenue (named after Chandran’s mother), and sight the brick-walled Uluru Children’s Home (UCH). Girls resplendent in golden yellow pavadai (long skirt), a sprinkling of boys in shorts and shirts, and their caregivers await our arrival. Chitra, fondly called Amma (Chandran is Appa), is greeted with cries of “Vanikam, Amma”, and each of us is welcomed with thick jasmine and rose garlands.

We enter UCH through a brilliant ochre-trimmed-with-green (colours of the Australian outback) thatched hut. Inside, clustered around the sandy courtyard, studded with trees and flowering shrubs, is a collection of similar-styled cottages. These are the dormitories, class rooms dining hall, kitchen, office, and a laundry area.

The eager children pull us shyly towards their latest acquisition – a gigantic granite statue of Saraswati, the Goddess of learning and wisdom. It was installed a week earlier to mark the opening of the two new dormitories that will accommodate another 50 children. Eight senior girls, and Gita, the House Mother, have moved into the new premises.

Aesthetics are given as much importance as practicality in the designing of both, the UCH complex and Chitra and Chandran’s home facing the centre. Chennai-based architect and building contractor R Krishnamurthy (Murthy) who has been involved since the conception stage affirms: “The design reflects the simplicity of the rural people, and merges with the surroundings. The original architectural concept has been a pro bono contribution by Australian architect Sandra Nervegna, with Indian architect Govind Rao executing the project. She conceptualised the two new hostel buildings in the shape of a mother’s arms ‘sheltering’ her children. At

the northern end stands the symbolic mother – Goddess Saraswati. I then constructed the Chandrans’ house with a central courtyard which is inspired by traditional South Indian architecture.

As the sun sets, we gather in the dining area for an evening of entertainment by young talent. Eleven-year-old Sarita, as Master of Ceremonies, speaks in flawless English. The girls still in their pavadai sing the welcome song, thereafter undergoing quick dress changes appropriate for each song and dance, emulating the latest numbers from Tamil movies. A surprise item is a German song, and volunteer Christine Krüger explains the lyrics: “One can always be happy with people who sing, as they are usually good people”. Next, six-year-old Yograj skillfully drums his own rhythmic compositions on a mini mridangam. A box of mithai is passed around to mark the end of the programme.

The children’s happy chatter seemingly hides the trauma of their past. Take Sarita, for instance. Our confident MC is the eldest of three siblings. Their father committed suicide and mother works as a housemaid in Chennai. Sarita and her sisters came to UHC and absorbed the warmth and affection as rapidly as do most of the children as they are enveloped by a sense of security, of belonging and being loved and cared for by their peers and caregivers. Yet, spells of homesickness and missing-their-parents are prevalent among the new entrants. A tender camaraderie exists between the children, and an unwritten law of the big-sister role which the older girls take on



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automatically. The youngest resident is one-year-old Akash, and the oldest is 13-year-old Ashwini, who is also the Captain. In addition there are Group Leaders overseeing cleanliness, meals, hygiene, security, singing, gardening and the library.

Gita, the House Mother, has been at the helm for three years. Her ever-smiling face bears testimony to her affectionate nature, a given must for someone caring for children who need TLC in large doses. Of her team of seven housecarers, Andal joined when the home opened in 2002 with eight children.

With a wake-up call at 6am, the children spend the first few hours going through a music



UCH children are instructed in basic computing skills, and use specially selected educational software to complement their regular school curricula

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session, bathing and praying. After breakfast they walk to the local government primary school about a kilometre away, smartly attired in their navy blue-and-white uniform.

To raise the quality of elementary education here, TEWFI meets many of the infrastructural needs of the school and also sponsors teachers' salaries towards a better teacher-student ratio. TEWFI has built the first toilet for the school, and an UHCC nurse visits weekly to inculcate health and hygiene lessons.

Upon their return at 5pm the children are again given a snack and milk and spend their time playing, studying and story telling till dinner and lights out at 9pm. Music, dance, sports and computer lessons fill the evenings.

Holidays and weekend mornings are spent tending to the plants, chopping vegetables and helping with chores. This is followed by four hours of enhancing their English and Tamil skills. Relaxed afternoons lead to TV viewing till dinner time. All meals start with inter-religious thanksgiving prayers in various languages. A set weekly menu includes rice, korma, idli, dosa, sambar, poriyal and on special days a vegetable biryani with eggs, payasam, vadai and sweets.

A Management Committee Meeting is held the next morning, a Sunday, as along with Chitra and Chandran is Trustee Jeet Soni from Melbourne, visiting with his family. Professor Asha Oumachigui, a gynecologist from Pondicherry, presides as Chairperson. Celestine, a resident social worker, reads out the agenda which incorporates progress certificates of children and visits by parents. Chandran suggests offering transportation cost to encourage family members who cannot afford the fare, to visit more frequently. Another request is for making health tests, including HIV, mandatory upon admitting a child, as many of the mothers are sex workers.

Christine Krüger is a social work student from HTWK Leipzig, Germany doing a placement at UCH. "We found Uluru after doing a web-search. Our curriculum requires learning about local health and socio-psychological problems and getting involved in leisure and after-school activities. We also give English, maths and computer lessons," she smiles.

Alex Craven came to Uluru two months ago as part of the Australian arm of Engineers Without Borders (EWB). "This is EWB's first major ICT Development Project in rural India. In Phase I my predecessor Daryl Anthony adeptly installed a pilot computer network



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at UCH, and initiated a training program to ensure local ownership and involvement in the facility. The facility features six computers funded by TEWFI, and is maintained by a trained local computer administrator and instructor. Children are instructed in basic computing skills, and use specially selected educational software to complement their regular school curricula. The children show great enthusiasm and are very receptive to new lessons; it is impressive how fast they grasp computer knowledge. Furthermore, on weekends the facility is made available to other children and young adults from the neighbouring villages. The current phase of this project is to develop an ambitious 40-machine Computer Education Centre, which is expected to be running by mid-2007," says the 25-year-old.

Chandran adds: "Our new multifunctional CEC aims to provide computer education as part of vocational training and to also emerge as a knowledge centre for the region with access to vital technical, educational and employment, information online."

Using a motivational angle helped clean up the Alampara beach. Reveals Chandran: "We would see some boys playing cricket with a stick instead of a bat. I told them that if they helped us clean the beach we would get them a cricket set. It worked! The beach has become litter free and they now play cricket with a

proper set!"

A college social work teacher, who preferred to remain anonymous, comes down from Chennai twice a month to "help where ever they need me", she says modestly. Like her, the goodwill generated by Uluru has got them numerous unseen, unsung volunteers. In addition, medical students, occupational therapists and social work students come for field training from India and abroad.

It is soon time for us to return home. Goodbyes are said, hugs exchanged, more photos taken. On the drive back Chandran speaks of his "desire to give back to the society that nurtured and raised me." And adds: "TEWFI is partnered by its Australian arm, The East West Overseas Aid Foundation (TEWOAF). It is uniquely volunteer-driven and promotes awareness about our needs and raises monies to fund the initiatives of TEWFI. We encourage the sharing of resources, skills and expertise from people around the world to help the disadvantaged. In return, they are greatly enriched by the experience they gain from our children at UCH", he concludes like a proud Appa. ■

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For more information, visit: www.tewfi.org. For volunteers: www.tewoaf.org.au