

# There and Back Again...

by Geri Johnson, President, FreeSchools World Literacy-USA

Title borrowed from J.R. Tolkien & The Hobbit

Each time I return from India I feel more like Bilbo Baggins. India presents extreme contrasts, a vast array of people, and experiences from the sublime to the inexplicable all of which is far removed from my day-to-day orderly life.

Christmas Eve 2011 found five of us rendezvousing at the Shanti (Peace in Hindi) House Hotel. And while the entrance was not the garden picture on the website (a fact that Geri commented regularly) the experience created by the staff was welcoming and indeed peaceful. The hotel owner hosted a Christmas Eve party for all guests. After 20 hours of travel from the USA, John Lange, Beth and Bruce Wenger found themselves wearing Maharajah headgear (hats?), sipping beer around a bonfire, and listening to an Indian gentleman sing Christmas carols.

On Christmas Day these five boarded the train to Bettiah, arriving 17 hours later on the morning of the 26th. The following morning, via the same route, our sixth companion, Michael Medved, arrived completing our group that included Dr. John Lange, Bruce Wenger, Beth Wenger, Margaret Yeo and Geri Johnson.

## *Why are we in Bihar?*

Bottom line, we came to support and extend the FreeSchools World Literacy vision and mission of ending ignorance and poverty by empowering women and children with a free education.





Sister Mary Crescence



Sister Crescence with Bruce Wenger and Michael Medved

Along with visiting schools, we had individual purposes for this trip. Teacher Sharing headed the list as the FreeSchools teachers specifically requested learning more teaching strategies that would engage the children. Michael, Beth and Geri came prepared to offer such training. Bruce, Finance Chairperson on the FSWL-USA Board, wanted a first-hand experience with the schools and to better understand how funds were apportioned. Margaret provided computer training to the office assistants while John was involved in the planning for a future medical hospital.

#### *Who Are You?*

On the afternoon of our arrival, we inaugurated a new sewing center and visited a FreeSchools class in the same village. As we concluded the 'official' part of the visit, the villagers asked us: Who are you? Where do you come from? What do you do in your country? Why are you in Bettiah?

The village leader pointedly asked us why have you come here and to some, why have you come again. The essence of our replies had to do with loving Sr. Crescence and wanting to assist her mission of literacy and learning to all children. The statement about Sr. Crescence was met with smiles & cheers. It was clear this Catholic Sister was deeply loved by these Hindu villagers.



[Above] Sister Emma with Dr. John Lange.

[Below] Sr. Crescence and the group inaugurating a sewing center.



Paraphrasing, the village leader commented that he felt a connection with us and that we were one; not foreign to each other. Bruce Wenger said that love makes us one. This Hindi gentleman pointed to the sky and said in English, "God makes us one".

### *You Never Know What Will Happen Next...*

Concurrent with our visit to the schools, an anti-human trafficking conference, organized by Sr. Mary Elise and held on the convent premises, occurred. For three days there were over 100 attendees that included Catholic and Protestant social welfare groups, medical personnel and government workers. This was a landmark occasion that united these varied groups to work and present their mission jointly.

Sr. Elise invited John Lange to observe the opening of this conference. Once there she asked him to "say a few words to inspire people". In the end, the doctor from America became the keynote speaker for this conference! You just never know what will happen next.

### *Teacher Sharing*

Cold weather conditions closed all schools in Bettiah for the week. Taking advantage of the school closure, the teacher training sessions were rescheduled and now began our week there. Sessions were offered to four groups of teachers over three days.

Michael Medved no sooner disembarked from the train and had breakfast when he was teaching the first math session. Geri taught basic language and literacy strategies, while Beth complimented both math and literacy concepts with appropriate songs that enhanced these concepts.

Between each song, Beth offered the teachers rationales on the importance of music and movement for learning and for enhancing the developing brain. (Later Beth commented that not in her wildest dreams would she have foreseen herself travelling through India singing and teaching "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes".)



*Michael teaching a math session*



*[Above] Beth teaching a song. [Below] Geri teaching basic language strategies.*



Beth began each session with the song “Friends 1-2-3”, which became Sr. Crescence’s favorite and our theme song for the week. We sang it during training session, in the villages, at the convent, in the car, and as we said farewell.

The most difficult part of our training experience was getting the teachers to arrange the tables and benches into a semi-circle versus straight rows. No sooner would we get the desired semi-circle when someone would return the tables to proper rows. Our ways must have seemed very strange to them.

Judging by the FreeSchools teachers’ eager participation, laughter, questions, interaction with each other and their comments, this first teacher sharing was highly successful. Feedback from the teachers included:

- They liked how Michael got them working as an interactive group and how they could do that with their students.
- They were impressed that children could and should “talk to each other” and how they were encouraged to “work out their own answers”.
- The materials used were simple and available in their environment.
- Teaching with music and stories was “fun”; “did not seem like learning”; nor was it “boring for the children”.
- They liked that the learning was “touchable” (i.e. use of manipulatives vs. only blackboard).

On the light side, Beth and I learned very quickly that Hindi cows don’t moo, nor do their chickens “cluck”. Each language has its own version of the sounds we depict animals to make sounds. Learning the Hindi for a cow’s moo or a sheep’s bah was a great source of humor for all, teachers and trainers. Old MacDonald Had a Farm will never be the same for us.

#### *Joy of Books*

For reasons never clear to us some students joined the workshop with their teacher. Ranging in age from maybe 3 years (came with siblings) to 11 years, they sat quietly watching all that we



# The children . . .





did. When invited, they fully participated. We were impressed with their self regulation and patience.

While Michael was creating patterns with the teachers, Beth and I took a stack of books to these students. Once the books were placed before them and they were invited to take a book, they pounced. They were excited to read the books aloud to us. Sometimes 5 or 6 children would read at the same time. Others were just excited to tell the story from the pictures. There was sheer joy on their faces and lots of laughter as they enjoyed story after story.

This was the moment that made EVERYTHING worthwhile for me.

This was the moment that eradicated the airport security lines, being stuck in Delhi traffic for hours, schlepping suitcases, all the noise of India particularly car horns, bouncing on the non-existent road to Motihari for over an hour, dust, fog, scary traffic, cold weather and cold water, and the constant parade of poverty—one another truly needy person after another.

To see a child's face beam when he or she read a book brought joy to my soul and (as my friend Heidi says) made "my heart sing".

The next day provided a distinctly different experience, though also amazing. Again students joined the training session. There were double the number than the day before and this group seemed to be new learners.

Again, as Michael shared with their teachers, Beth and I took the children outside with stacks of books. I found myself with 14 children who had NO experi-



ence with books. As I modelled how to hold and open a book, look at the pictures and turn the page, they watched with fascination. Each child was handed a book, which they eagerly took. Some sat on their book (perhaps to save it). Some held it upright. Most of the children held their books by a corner and shook it.

Though fascinating to watch them explore this new object, it was also shocking. I have never met a child who did not know what to do with a book, even if they could not read.

Communication was limited as my few words in Hindi (hello, thank you, how are you, more tea please) were not helpful in this circumstance. After awhile, I collected all the books and opened a simple animal book. While pointing to an animal the children named it in Hindi. In such manner we interacted with the book, until a FreeSchool teacher rescued us and read to the children. The teacher had them mimic the



way each animal moved. They eagerly looked for the next picture. OH! The lights in their minds switched on. They "got it".

### *Tailoring Schools*

The tailoring schools instruct girls ages 12 years and older to sew by hand, with a treadle sewing machine, to crochet, knit and embroider. These skills enhance home making as well as provide the opportunity for income. We inaugurated two new tailoring schools and visited three schools with advanced students. The young ladies usually stay about a year learning to create patterns and to make clothing and household items (i.e. bedspreads, table clothes, curtains). The quality of work amongst the advanced students was stunning. The blouses, knitted sweaters, purses and embroidered bedspreads were worthy of high praise but more importantly could be sold in any market.

### *So Much More to Share*

This was truly the tip of the iceberg. There were dozens of humorous moments and touching stories such as how:

- Every village school has its own character, strengths and needs
- We all ended up as part of an infant's baptismal group picture
- Everyone with a camera wanted to take our picture & we wanted theirs
- We met a talented young man who acted in play of his creation or we heard the stunning voice of a young girl who sang to us
- The dear Sisters take their games very seriously which is how 'Bruce was mauled by nuns' (check out his dancing)



- We were welcomed with a live manager scene and the song "We wish you a Merry Christmas" by one tailoring school students

- Margaret went around Bihar on the back of a motorcycle.

THANK YOU for your support to FreeSchools World Literacy-USA.

Geri Johnson, President