

# The Save a Child Field Trip 2018

Volunteers Hilka Klinkenberg and Erica Allen  
go to India on behalf of Save a Child  
to visit the homes and meet the children

Hilka reflects on their experience and shares some happy memories



**Hilka (right) and Erica**

Our two-week trip to India in November passed in a flash, despite the long days. Afterwards, as I was flying back to the US for Thanksgiving, I had a poignant moment of reflection.

This year there was even more to be thankful for. Our time in India was so rewarding. We had wonderful experiences, met amazing, caring, gifted and dedicated people who work day in day out to provide so many children with a safe, secure, loving environment, plentiful nourishing food and a very good education.

For our core work we met the several hundred children supported through Save a Child, to photograph each one and learn about their development and progress over the past year. I

believe I shall remember every one of them. To see their resilience and the enthusiasm with which they greet their daily lives was not only heartwarming, it was a life lesson.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to see how much can be done with so little in the way of resources, by American or British standards. It reaffirms my commitment to doing all I can to support Save a Child. Here are a few of my special memories with the children.

## **Jain Ashram, Delhi**

A feast of songs, smiles, henna painting and Bollywood dancing

We had unavoidably arrived into four days of festivities for Diwali, Govardhan and Baidooj. So our time at the Ashram was a little different from previous field trips. Many of the girls had gone home for the holidays, so we enjoyed a longer time and deeper experience with those who remained. *(In February, Louise Nicholson, founder of Save a Child, will be meeting the sponsored girls we did not meet.)*

We arrived with Save a Child's local colleagues, the redoubtable and wise **Kamal Chugh**, who has worked with deprived women and children for half a century, and her dependable assistant **Uma Shah**, who seems to know each and every child and was our translator. The girls welcomed us with the bhindi ceremony—a hand-crafted card, songs and Jain prayers—with shy smiles escaping their lips as they sang.



**The girls welcoming us to Jain Ashram**



**Receiving my welcome bhindi and card**

We met **Ritu Das**, who runs the Ashram her grandmother founded, and two women who work with her: a music teacher who had come to Jain Ashram aged two in 1955, when the Ashram opened; and Mrs. Das's assistant, who had arrived aged eight, lived there until she married, then chose to work there.

Today, many of the girls continue to university while living at the ashram, and if they marry Mrs. Das ensures they enjoy the full traditional Indian wedding. There is a strong feeling of security and continuity at the place.

After lunch, which the older girls helped cook, we were given a tour of the kitchen. We saw the computer and crafts rooms, and the spice room where staff and girls grind all-natural spices. Proceeds from selling home-made embroidery and spices help support the ashram.

With no school on the day we visited, we spent the afternoon getting to know the girls. We saw their art work, had our hands decorated with henna patterns, and Erica showed the girls how to take photographs with her camera. Then it was time for fun! Suddenly no-one was shy. The TV was turned to a music channel and it was time to dance and laugh. Of course, we had to join in. Bollywood has nothing on these girls!

*See the girls in the movie about life at the Ashram: <http://www.saveachildindia.com/#sac-films>*

## **Ramakrishna Vivekananda Mission, West Bengal (RKVM)**

Many homes to visit, impressive schooling and Indian driving!

The girls and boys at RKVM's headquarters at Barrackpore beside the Hooghly River live in spacious, British-built bungalows, with well-tended gardens and great spreading trees. The Mission has satellite residential homes across West Bengal, where each day it teaches over 10,000 students. We had a heavy schedule to meet each of the more than 200 SaC-sponsored children living in the various locations, and talk to them about how life was treating them.

First, we went to **RKVM Dwipa**, a small home of just 40 resident students, some of them SaC-sponsored. The teachers were especially proud of their new school building, a clean, up-to-date facility. Numbers swell to more than 400 with the local day students. We were impressed by how many girls love studying science.

**RKVM Joyrambati** was our next stop, a three-hour car ride away! Being driven, let alone driving, in India is not for the faint of heart! First, we went to the boys' facility. What an eager bunch they were, all crowding around and eager to be part of the action. After interviewing the SaC-sponsored boys, we went to meet the equally ebullient girls. During our stay, we talked with the much-respected **Swami Prabuddahananda** who oversees Joyrambati.



**Swami Prabuddahananda with the boys at RKVM Joyrambati**

The following day, we drove another three hours to **RKVM Purulia**, where we met more eager boys and **Swami Tilak**, who comes from this remote and poor rural area and therefore understands local customs and needs. We visited a nearby village, Sibdi. A number of the village girls ride their bicycles several kilometers a day to attend school at the RKVM home, a program funded by SaC. They all raved about the quality of the education, the discipline and the exceptional teachers.

The road back to **Barrackpore** had heavy festival traffic - another hair-raising Indian driving experience - where we based ourselves for the next few days.

A short drive away is **RKVM Suryapur**, set in a peaceful oasis, where all the girls are either visually or hearing impaired. The girls' welcome drink was fresh coconut water, to rehydrate us after the scalding daytime heat. We saw how the staff tailored their many different forms of communication depending on how the girls would best understand.

The love and care of the staff to the children was plain. As we toured the classrooms, we learnt about the specialized teaching given. To see how joyfully these girls were thriving and learning was truly inspiring.

*See the girls dancing in the short Suryapur movie at <http://www.saveachildindia.com/#sac-films>*



**Hilka & Erica with the wonderful staff at Suryapur**

Back at the Barrackpore campus, we met **Swami Nityarupananda**, RKVM's General Secretary since 2013. Known to all as Swami-ji, he grew up at the Mission, so he understands what it is to be a deprived child arriving at a big institution, a long way from the village that used to be home. In his relentless efforts to serve the poor, Swami-ji draws upon the resources of the local state government and the voluntary work of ex-students.

Although we had a huge number of children to interview and photograph, we found time to meet the football (soccer) coach, **Krishnendu Pal**, to discuss SaC's new football program. Soccer is as popular as cricket in Bengal and when, much to their surprise, an RKVM team won a national league in 2017, SaC found the money for the trainers, footballs, boots and other kit to take them to the next level.



Pal spends two days a month at each of three RKVM locations, working with the boys to improve their football skills; in between, they have local trainers. He had the Barrackpore boys play an impromptu game for us, and Erica joined right in. The RKVM team is already improving and has recently won a national tournament in Delhi!

**Sujit Biswas**—Sujit-ji to all—is the tireless point-person for SaC’s sponsored children at all the RKVM homes. He overcame many logistical hurdles to have us meet each RKVM child sponsored by SaC, and he acted as translator. At Barrackpore, he gave us a tour of all the schools – primary through grades 9 and 10. Most Class 10 students were in the midst of taking a major exam, so of course we did not disturb them. A bevy of smiling class 9 girls gave us beautiful burgundy-colored scarves they had knitted themselves.

*See the children celebrating in the RKVM movie at <http://www.saveachildindia.com/#sac-films>*



**Classrooms at Barrackpore schools full of disciplined, enthusiastic students**

## **All Bengal Women’s Union Women’s Welfare Home for Girls (ABWU)**

Transforming the lives of traumatized girls

Our final stop was ABWU in central Kolkata, where **Mrs Ratna Sen**, the President, first started volunteering in 1954. First, we met **Susmita** and **Smriti** over a cup of tea—in India there is always time for tea. They then helped us interview and photograph the girls. What struck us was how polite they all were and, impressively, all spoke adequate to very good English thanks to the SaC-funded English program which we watched **Zohra** teaching that afternoon.

We also met three SaC-funded **counselors** and heard about their work. At ABWU, most girls have suffered some form of abuse and, for the most part, have been rescued and brought to ABWU by the police. As each counselor took it in turns to tell us about heart-rending real-life case studies, it was hard not to shed a tear.

And to see the confident girls after they have received the ABWU’s loving care, support and counselling, you would never guess they had endured such horrors in their past. One

program that helps the girls is dance therapy, which we observed and took part in. The girls dressed up for our visit, some even managing to smudge a bit of lip tint onto their lips! They dragged us onto the dance floor and insisted we join in until we were a sweaty, laughing mess.



**Dance therapy helps the traumatized girls**



**Chopping dried fruit for ABWU's fruit cake**

On Sundays, the girls can learn karate from American volunteer **Fred**. They are very dedicated and have earned 4 white, 1 yellow, 3 orange, 2 green and 5 red belts—very impressive! We watched a drill by the older girls, after which the younger children joined in.

Fred also teaches older girls krav maga self-defense, which gives them a sense of confidence and security when walking Kolkata's busy, bustling streets. After the karate, some older girls performed classical Indian dance for us. The quality of the dancing was so first rate, it came as no surprise to discover that ABWU girls have won places at India's top classical dance colleges.

In addition to the usual range of subjects taught, the girls also learn cooking, spice-grinding, block printing, sewing, knitting and weaving, skills that will help them get a job when their schooling comes to an end. And of course we bought some of the high quality products they had made in class in the ABWU store.

*See the girls doing krav maga and dance at <http://www.saveachildindia.com/#sac-films>*

At ABWU we sat down each day to delicious lunches at the Suruchi restaurant next door, which is run by former ABWU women, and also in the girls' dining hall, where—to our amazement—we discovered that every day of the year, with the help of just two kitchen assistants, the chef prepares 200 meals, served three times a day, in addition to two snacks.

The food was so delicious, I'm already looking forward to those lunches when we return to see the children again next year!