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OJAITOINDIA

Local nonprofit helps pave path to education and opportunity

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FROM OJAI TO INDIA

Local nonprofit helps pave path to education and opportunity

BY CARMEN SMYTH

If you want something done just ask Elizabeth Burnett, even if it includes building a school in India and housing dozens of orphan children. When Burnett sets her mind to accomplish something, she gets it done. That's how Burnett, an expatriate Ojai resident, found herself in a small town in India, running the Prashanti School.

In her mid-70s, Burnett ties her thick black hair back in a bun, and the lines on her face tell a story of a deep life, well-lived. Her eyes sparkle with mischievous youth and she rolls her Rs with authority as she speaks about the school and the children. She wears a traditional Indian sari with ease and a bindi in the center of her forehead. She has been living in India for 31 years now. She has merged with the Indian culture. When asked what she misses about the United States she smiles and says, "I miss salads. I couldn't go back now. I would feel out of place."

She whisks around the Prashanti schoolyard with commanding presence as she directs staff with flawless confidence. She runs a well-organized institution. Her message is delivered with loving kindness and selfless generosity but peppered with stern authority. She is a woman in control with one purpose, to house and educate the underprivileged children of India, one child at a time.

Burnett came to the state of Odisha in India in 1986 to study Odissi dance, a lyrical, expressive style of classical Indian dance. She settled in the coastal town of Puri and became fascinated with the history and culture of the area. She began working with local historian, poet and writer Somnath Khuntia. She shot video and photographs for his published works.

During that time Burnett and Khuntia started Prashanti Preschool to tutor students on a small scale. "I did supplemental tutoring so kids would not drop out of school. We gave free

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— Elizabeth Burnett, co-founder of Ojai-based World Family Foundation

education to children in need,” Burnett said.

In 1999 a super-cyclone made a direct hit on the town of Puri. It was the strongest recorded tropical cyclone in the North Indian Ocean and the most destructive in the area. There were almost 10,000 deaths recorded and 1.6 million homes damaged. “Puri was essentially destroyed,” Burnett said. The Indian government was overwhelmed by the devastation.

The mayor of Puri brought 21 orphans to Burnett's home, gave her a small supplement, and asked her to take in the children and house them. Burnett and others sent out a plea for help from local agencies and organizations abroad in the United States.

“We had no food, no dress, no shelter. You can't turn your head away when it's on your doorstep,” said Burnett. “Sponsors raised money through benefits and talks, and Indian nongovernmental organizations, (NGO), which combined with U.S. donors to purchase the building. Six months after the cyclone hit we had a boarding school. The organizations came up with the money to buy the property that is now Prashanti School.”

“The original school started as a boarding program, tutoring students and teaching them life skills,” Burnett continued. The

children then attended local public school that held classes in Odia, the state language of Odisha.

“These children do not have the same advantage as children that go to English schools,” said Burnett. “If they don't know English they will never be able to compete in the job market.”

In 2002, World Family Foundation (WFF) was established in Ojai as a tax-exempt charitable trust. The organization supports Prashanti School and all the needs of the children. Functioning on a volunteer basis, the seven board members raise funds and offer sponsorships for children in need. Burnett is one of the founders of WFF.

“In the first few years we had no money. Now all of those original kids have made it through school, coming from illiterate backgrounds. Many went on to college and vocational training,” she said.

In 2009, with the support of WFF, Prashanti International School, a day program, was opened on a nearby site to give the children a better education than the government schools were providing. This additional building houses six more classrooms and accommodates the growing number of students.

“The school registered as an English medium school with

classes taught in English,” said Burnett. The residential buildings are also used as classrooms. The support for that expansion came from the WFF, sponsors and donors. “The residential children that are accepted here are orphans, fatherless or their father is crippled.”

The residential students are supported by sponsorships organized by WFF. The care of a child includes housing, food, clothing, medical and educational expenses. Sponsorship of a child can also be shared with other donors.

Leslie and Bruce Bouche of Ojai were inspired to help when they found out about the school and WFF mission. In 2004 they began sponsoring Sunil Patra. Patra was 8 when his uncle brought him to the school. His father had abandoned the family and he was being raised by his mother:

“She couldn’t support him anymore,” explained Leslie. “We have been sponsoring Sunil for about 10 years now. Our first trip to Prashanti School to meet Sunil was in 2013 and we have come every year since then. Sponsors and supporters are always welcome, and the visits are a source of great joy and encouragement for the children. Patra was never a strong student academically but showed a natural talent as a dancer.”

Through the support of the Bouches, Patra has graduated from school and has been accepted into the Odissi Research Center program to study Odissi classical dance. With this opportunity he has the potential to perform and teach. The Bouches have agreed to continue their support of Patra through his studies.

“We have a feeling of family. We are very proud of Sunil. He came from a completely illiterate, impoverished background, and now his world has expanded and he has a bright future,” Leslie continued.

The Bouches sponsored a second child, Lipuranjan Biswal (Lipu) in 2012. He is in the third grade now and doing very well in school.

Leslie joined the WFF board in 2007 and Bruce followed soon after. There are seven members on the all-volunteer board, and 90 percent of the support received goes directly to the students.

“The objective is to provide a safe and loving place off the streets,” Leslie said.

Leslie is also a member of the Rotary Club of Ojai. WFF and the Ojai Rotarians joined forces with the Rotary Club of Sri Jagannath Dham, Puri and installed water purification units in the school and in the residential housing.

The Rotary Club of Ojai also donated seven laptops with cabinets, Wi-Fi equipment and surge protectors, one for every classroom. These laptops are the first computers the school has ever had. The Rotary Club of Srikshetra, Puri, also provided building materials for the expansion of the residential building to provide an additional classroom.

“Ojai Rotarians have a keen interest for international participation,” Bruce said.

The Oak Grove School students in Ojai have also organized to sponsor two Prashanti School students. After a presentation by the WFF, the student council voted to take the remaining funds in their treasury and sponsor Mantu Behera and Bhabani Moharana. So far that has paid for their schooling fees for three years. The Oak Grove students also collected their favorite books and shipped the 60-pound package to the school to help start a library.

I spoke with Behera on a recent trip to India to visit the



FACING PAGE: Bruce Bouche, Elizabeth Burnett, Dr. Edie Resto and Leslie Bouche look at the construction progress for the addition to the Prashanti International School. The Bouches and Resto are Ojai residents. **TOP:** Mita Madam, the head of academics at the Prishanti International School, helps students with their work. **ABOVE:** The residential Prashanti School students perform the yoga positions they have learned in class for the rest of the students in the school courtyard.

school. He is a bright 14-year-old boy with thick dark hair, brown eyes and an infectious smile.

“I was 7 when I came to the school,” said Behera. His mother has a debilitating skin disease and his father abandoned the family. His uncle brought him to the school. Behera is now in the fifth grade at Prashanti School and will stay there through high school. When asked what his favorite subjects are he smiles and says, “Math and English. I like to create things. I want to be a botanist, scientist and teacher.” Behera’s parents were both illiterate and now he has plans to go onto college.

The Ojai and Ventura community support, along with others, has helped Prashanti School sponsor over 38 residential students and has enrolled around 140 day-students from the community at a very low tuition. It provides schooling, tutoring, art, music and yoga classes.

The student sponsorships through WFF provide financial and emotional support for the students through annual monetary contributions, letter writing and visits from sponsors.

With its continuing enrollment Prashanti School has out-

grown its capacity. The school is working on an expansion project to meet the needs of the students and the community. There is not enough classroom space to accommodate the growing number of students. The school is only able to graduate students through the sixth grade. The project will add another building that will house seventh through tenth grade classrooms. This would bring the students through high school graduation in India.

The expansion, funded primarily by U.S. donations, has completed the first phase of construction, and the second phase is close to completion. It must be done before monsoon season and classes are set to begin June 1. The second half of the building expansion is slated for next year. It will include an outdoor auditorium and a second phase of classrooms.

Thirty years later, Burnett is still focused. She deals with accounting and budget issues, school accreditation with the Indian government, staffing, admissions and all the other daily functions of the school.

Burnett’s title as executive director of Prashanti School and one of the founders of WFF does not adequately describe what she really does. She touches the life of every student that enters the school gates.

When asked why she does it, Burnett does not hesitate. “Education is transformative, education with values is huge. For each child whose life has been transformed, they have affected their family, their communities, and 100 lives have been changed.”

“Why should someone in California care?” says Burnett, “We all live in the same world and we have an effect on another country. In terms of money, such a small amount to us makes such a difference. The global effect of working together makes the big difference.”

When asked about the difficulties she faces daily, Burnett said, “There are lots. Just putting food

on the table is an accomplishment. The biggest, really, is finding the right teachers and we don’t have enough classroom space. But with a lot of people, every drop makes an ocean. All the kids that come here are living on the edge. All the people are on the edge.”

All the kids who have attended Prashanti School have graduated from high school. All have come from illiterate backgrounds. One is now pharmacist and others are teachers and nursing aides.

WFF is committed to its mission statement of “Changing the world one child at a time.”

For more information about WFF and Prashanti School visit www.worldfamilyfnd.org. ♦

Carmen Smyth is a freelance journalist based in Ventura. She traveled to Puri, India, to report on the Ojai-based World Family Foundation and Prashanti School and the contributions of local people and organizations like the Rotary Club of Ojai.