

## Rescued from India's slums



Three years after it was set up by Dubai expatriates Lucy Bruce and Gaurav Sinha, Harmony House, a day shelter for underprivileged children in Gurgaon in India, is at full capacity with 250 children. There are more than 600 on the waiting list, and one couple are raising funds to expand. Among the children the shelter looks after is Alina Pandey, 7, second from left. Alina's mother Kalpana had to stop work as a cleaner because there was nowhere for her daughter to go while she was at work. Thanks to Harmony House, Kalpana was able to retrain and now has a steady job. Story: a6. Simon De Trey-White for The National

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numbers #

**200**

the number of underprivileged children looked after by Harmony House since it was founded in 2010

**6**

months to 16 years. Age of children accepted at the shelter

**40,000**

the cost in dirhams of operating Harmony House each month

**100,000**

The amount in dirhams Manav Fernandez hopes to raise for an expansion to Harmony House by climbing Mt Kilimanjaro

## UAE giving



Children such as these who live in the slums of Gurgaon in India are being given shelter at Harmony House while their parents earn money so the families can eat. Simon de Trey-White / The National

### Expansion // Support

## Fundraiser's goal is to scale Mount Kilimanjaro

Manal Ismail

DUBAI // Last month Harmony House launched its second site, just a few metres away from the first, to look after 200 more children. But the shelter needs financial support to continue its expansion.

Manav Fernandez, an Indian expatriate in Dubai, hopes to help. The father of two is on a Dh100,000 fundraising mission to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in September.

Originally from Delhi, Mr Fernandez believes it is often easy for expatriates living a comfortable life in Dubai to lose sight of their values. So for his 40th birthday, he hopes to follow in the footsteps of his eldest son, Nirvana, to raise funds. Two years ago, Nirvana made the climb to raise funds for the first shelter.

"It's very important for each and every individual, especially those of us who are privileged, healthy and have good jobs, to understand that there are a lot of people out there who don't have anything," Mr Fernandez said. His biggest fear is not the nearly 6,000-metre climb, which will consume eight hours a day for six days, but that the initiative will not find its momentum. "It would be a shame," he said. "There's a lot of wealth in the city, you just have to go out one night to a fancy restaurant and see how people literally throw money down the tube."

Although Mr Fernandez, an operations director, is happy to be living with the safety and security the UAE provides, he said that everyone needs a reality check now and then. "Of course as a parent we always want the best for our children," he said. "But it's also important for them to touch base with reality and understand that they are special and this is not normal."

"These underprivileged kids really need help and we need the support to keep this going," he said. "A small amount from our wages every month doesn't hurt anyone, but that money, when it translates to these children, makes a massive difference."

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### how to help

To donate money to the "Walk This Way" initiative and the development of Harmony House's second shelter visit: www.walkthisway.in or www.harmonyhouseindia.org

► Track Mr Fernandez's progress on Twitter and Facebook: @ManavFernandez and https://www.facebook.com/walkthisway.in

# Gift of harmony to young lives

## Shelter for underprivileged Indian children

Opening of Harmony House in the slums of New Delhi by a couple from Dubai transforms the lives of hundreds of poor families

Manal Ismail and Suryatapa Bhattacharya

GURGAON, INDIA // Kalpana Pandey was thrown out of her ancestral home in Lucknow in northern India after a confrontation with her father-in-law. With limited education - she left school at 13 - Mrs Pandey struggled to make ends meet. She earned 1,500 rupees (Dh90) a month cleaning people's homes, but she quickly lost that income because she had to take her daughter Alina, then five, to work.

"If she sat on a chair, people would

put her down on the floor and tell me they don't like it when my daughter comes along with me," Mrs Pandey says. "Where could I have left such a small child?"

With no money to pay the fees for a private school and no government schools within walking distance, there were few options.

Finally, someone pointed Mrs Pandey to Harmony House, a day shelter founded by an expatriate couple from Dubai that has transformed the lives of dozens of families and helped more than 200 underprivileged children since 2010.

Alina, now seven, has now been studying, playing and eating healthy meals there for the past two years.

Lucy Bruce, from the UK, and her husband, Gaurav Sinha, from Delhi, set up their own charity after frustrating experiences with other organisations.

"After investigating what would be the best option the only thing we came up with is if we did something ourselves where we knew that everything that was being pledged was going directly to the cause," Ms Bruce said. At first, Harmony House had few takers: children who live on the streets are used to their freedom. So Ms Bruce went into the slums of Gurgaon, 25 kilometres south west of New Delhi, knocking on doors and explaining to parents how their children could benefit.

Things quickly picked up, and the shelter is now at full capacity with 250 children and more than 600 on the waiting list. It is trying to collect funds to expand its second site, which will accommodate another 200 children. In addition to providing children with nourishment and a safe, secure place, the shelter works with local private schools to set up an academic curriculum. Vocational programmes are available for older children.

"Many of the children who came to us three years ago couldn't identify a shape or count numbers," Ms Bruce said. "And that's literally a 13 or 14-year-old who didn't have that kind of basic education. They had no ambitions... but now if you ask any child in Harmony House what they want to do, they all know there are goals that can be achieved and they're working hard to achieve them." The shelter also offers self-defence courses and counselling to educate girls about sexual assault or abuse. "A lot of girls have suffered, unfortunately, at the hands of their families

or friends, so we train them what to do in these situations," Ms Bruce said. "Many of them don't even know they're being abused at the time, so we talk about what is or isn't acceptable."

The shelter looks after children from six months old to 16. Many come from large families with parents who cannot look after them because of work, illness or substance abuse. This often leaves children as young as seven with the responsibility of caring for their younger siblings, one of the main reasons the shelter provides a nursery.

With no corporate sponsors, Harmony House relies solely on personal donations, which come mostly from the UAE and the UK. The existing facility costs between Dh30,000 and Dh10,000 to operate each month. Funds that can't be met through donations are partially covered by the couple's Dubai-based branding agency, Insignia.

Ms Bruce, who won the Emirates Woman Award in the humanitarian category for her work with Harmony House in 2010, also runs the Home Grown Children's Eco Nursery in Dubai, where a portion of the fees are given to the shelter.

Mrs Pandey's life has transformed since her daughter entered the shelter. She found the time to train as a security guard and has had a steady job for a month, working at a hotel and earning 5,000 rupees a month - almost three times her previous salary. Alina dreams of being a nurse when she grows up.

"Before I worried about where my next meal would come from," Mrs Pandey said. "Now, with the help of Harmony House, I am able to live a life of dignity. I can feed myself, support my husband and watch my child grow into a decent person."

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Lucy Bruce at her home in Dubai. Antonie Robertson / The National

### Study // Classes

## Father's gratitude for daughters' education

Suryatapa Bhattacharya

GURGAON, INDIA // When Ashok Yadav's land in Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh, was bought by a company that wanted to build a thermal plant, he was forced to move his family of eight to Delhi. As landless farmers, he and his 26-year-old son, Ravi, had few skills that would transfer to the city, but the countryside offered no more opportunity. The family pays 12,000 rupees (Dh713) to rent two rooms, leaving another 12,000 earned between Mr Yadav and his son for other expenses. This includes cooking gas, which costs 1,300 rupees a cylinder, as well as food, clothing and transport expenses.

"We earn less and spend more, which is why we are grateful to Harmony House for taking in our daughters," Mr Yadav, a gardener, said. Vasundhara, 14, Pooja, 7, and his granddaughter, Jolie, 3, study at the shelter. For three months after they arrived in Gurgaon, the girls sat at home. Mr Yadav tried to enrol them in classes but most of the area schools are private. Government schools are free, but they are not in walking distance of Mr Yadav's slum.

Harmony House changed all that. "They are so well taken care of, the food they eat, it is so nutritious that when they come home, they are not hungry for a long time. The burden to look after the girls is a lot less. I am grateful for that," Mr Yadav said. The girls sit together and study, helping each other out with their homework and assignments. "I am undereducated," Mr Yadav said. "My son has barely studied past Class 8 so we are of no help to these girls when it comes to education. I am glad they can take care of each other that way."

Vasundhara wants to be a teacher one day "because I really like my teachers here", she says. "Just what is in my textbooks but all around, so much more." "I have discussed this with my parents and they are fine with my plans but they want to finish my education at Harmony House first."

Like the other older students at Harmony House, Vasundhara goes

to a private school near by in the evenings, a minute's walk away, which offers evening classes to the underprivileged children at the shelter.

The idea is that they get the bulk of their education at Harmony House and use the private school to formally endorse it, said Meghna Eldmani Maira, the manager of Harmony House.

Renting a second villa will not only help accommodate the growing number of children that seek Harmony House's services, Ms Maira said, but will also provide more vocational courses for girls such as Vasundhara, whose parents may not be able to afford a college education for her in a few years.

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