

Creating Social Harmony

| Shilpy Arora/ FG |

Tucked away in the calm neighbourhood of Sector 17 is Harmony House, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that helps underprivileged women and children from the nearby slums. Started by a couple, Lucy Bruce from Britain and Gaurav Sinha from India, Harmony House serves as a community centre that provides education, food and shelter to over 200 children. Housed in two bungalows, the Centre delivers education in a safe, fun and loving environment. The bungalow houses classrooms for different age groups, an activity room that is used by all, two kitchens, a dining room, two libraries, a computer lab and a medical room. Stocked with bright-coloured furniture, white boards, colourful books, arts and crafts resources, stimulating games and toys and topical posters, the Centre looks like an exciting and motivating space to learn. "We want to improve the lives of children at a physical, emotional and intellectual level. Thus we provide them opportunities to play with toys, build houses, paint pictures, watch cartoons on TV and take part in other activities like the 'normal' children. We hope these would be enrich-



ing and memorable experiences for them," says Meghna Eidnani, Manager, Harmony House.

The NGO provides children with a well-rounded education. Subjects such as Hindi, English, Mathematics, Science, Music, Arts and Crafts and Cooking are taught to the children at both the primary and secondary level. "I think what these children need the most is an awareness about nutrition, hygiene and moral values, to help them cope better in their home environment," says Mrs. Jain, a teacher. The NGO encourages children to go to 'normal' schools as well, because it can't issue any school certificates to the children. For the older children, the NGO runs vocational classes, in order to make it easier for them to get a job in future. The NGO is focusing on yoga, stitching and beautician courses. "The ob-



jective is to train these kids such that, by the time they are 18 they have enough training and experience and can get respectable jobs," says Meghna. Breakfast, lunch and evening snacks are



provided to the children. Interestingly, the NGO depends solely on donations in kind to help the children and women.

After facing criticism from her family for spending seven hours in school, Padmini, 12, left her school last year. "My father said that I could earn Rs. 100 a day if I didn't go to school. He made me quit the school. But my mother wanted me to study, and so she now sends me to Harmony House in the evenings, after work," smiles Padmini. Harmony House has been successful in spreading awareness about the importance of children's education among the mothers. That is why women from the nearby slums are helping their children to study. "Mothers are invited to participate in the daily events at Harmony House. We noticed that mothers do not want to leave their small kids alone at home, or

are forced to make their older children stay home and take care of their younger siblings. So we invite toddlers, children and women - the whole family - to spend time together at Harmony House. While children can learn in the classrooms, their mothers can earn by helping within the facility," says Meghna. The NGO provides vegetables, stationary and toiletries to the women. It is also developing a programme for women, to help them learn new skills, see a doctor and get social and welfare advice from experts. For mothers-to-be, the NGO arranges pre-natal and post-natal camps, where doctors provide pregnant women with health and hygiene related information.

Harmony House is working hard to enroll their students in colleges or get them work placements, as soon as they turn 18. The NGO would like to see its children achieve their dreams, and is working on how best it can help. Going forward, a new Centre has come up in the last year - the NGO plans to increase the number of children. Though founders Lucy and Gaurav live in Dubai, they frequently visit Harmony House. Besides, Gaurav's mother and brother are actively involved in the day-to-day activities. ♦