

Bringing Back The Lost Years

(Shirin Mann / FG)

As we walk through the large iron gates of Harmony House, we are welcomed by a colourful display of rangoli, and a bench full of children seated for lunch. They quickly stand up and greet us, "Good afternoon, welcome to Harmony House." Soon after, they shuffle their way back onto the benches, fold their hands, and shut their eyes in prayer—before they start their meal. We stand in admiration, watching these underprivileged, but grateful, children.

An independent, non-profit, charitable organisation—set up in April 2010, by Lucy Bruce, a British national married to Gaurav Sinha—Harmony House serves as a community centre for women and children. The organisation takes care of the food, clothing, shelter and education of the underprivileged children living in the slums near by. Operating in a villa in Sector 17, Harmony House offers language skills, applied sciences, music, arts and craft, social studies, manners and etiquette; besides the core subjects of English, Hindi and Mathematics.

Lucy Bruce, Founder and active fund raiser says, "Harmony House has only been made possible by the support of the people who have shared our vision, and then helped make it happen. Without their support there would be no Harmony House. It is humbling and heartwarming to know that so many people care about the lives of strangers, who desperately need of help. Our prayers and thanks to them."

Harmony House today accommodates 180 children—the youngest is a year and a half old, and the oldest is 16. Divided in five groups—Teddy Bears, Pandas, Rabbits, Lions and Elephants—the children are allotted their groups based on their age and learning capacity. The Teddy Bears group has the toddlers. "We encourage our children to go to 'normal' schools, because here at Harmony House we provide an overall learning experience, but not school certificates. We also get children in batches. Out of 180 students, 80 to 90 go to Government schools, and come to us after 2 pm, to attend English classes (that are not provided in their school). Some others that go for afternoon school first attend Harmony House from 9:30 am to 2 pm. The ones that stay the whole day (from 9:30 am to 5 pm) are usually the toddlers; or those who don't go to school at all" says Meenakshi Khanna, Head Teacher, Harmony House.

The House also lays equal emphasis on providing the children with a safe and loving environment, a contrast to the difficult surroundings of their homes. The caretakers of the House not only take care of these kids, but also devote their time to counselling their parents.

Saroj Khanna, teacher at Harmony House, says, "Earlier we used to get several complaints from the children that they were getting beaten up at home because they wanted to study. Whenever we hear this



OF ONE ACCORD: Children at play at Harmony House

from the kids, we call the parents and counsel them, telling them about the importance of education. We usually tell them that if we, being strangers, are looking after their children, how can they be so harsh on them. And now, when they see the improvement in their kids—the ability to read and write in English, and the changes in their behaviour—they are very pleased. Today we also have some parents who want to study."

"These children had lost their childhood, and we are trying to bring some of it back. They get to play with toys, build houses, paint pictures, watch cartoons on TV—and all other activities that normal children take part in," says Saroj.

Luciani Barla, 13 years old, is a student at the Harmony House; and attends school post noon, when she is done with working with her mother as a domestic help. "My father wanted me to work because we needed more money in the house, and so would beat me up when I insisted on going to school. But my mother stood by me, and said that this is the only time when I can study and learn; because I will never get this opportunity again. We used to have a lot of fights in the house initially; and then my uncle interfered and asked me to listen to both. So my mother and I convinced my father to let me come here. Now I go to work in

the mornings with my mother, and then come here to learn. I love coming here—I paint, draw, write, read story books, and also play with toys."

With a strength of eight full time teachers, and a few volunteers, Harmony House functions five days a week. It depends entirely on funding and support provided in the form of donations—ranging from monetary contributions, to books, sta-

ing, playing and watching TV; and finally, a communal kitchen and dining area. A similar setup is also in place on the first floor, due to the increasing strength of the children coming in. The activity and learning rooms are equipped with bright furniture, white boards, alphabet and number posters, paintings made by the children themselves, arts and crafts resources, and stimulating games and toys—making

ing a competitive test, along with an interview. An early student of Harmony House, Priya is now entitled to free education till Class 12. She will also be provided with free books, uniform, shoes and stationery from the school. Priya still attends Harmony House activities in the evenings. "I like both my new school and Harmony House. After I am done studying, I come here to play—and I love it" says Priya with a big smile.

Apart from education and learning, Harmony House also provides medication, hygiene facilities and social services to women and children. Every Tuesday a doctor visits the school, for a general health check of the children. As per need, the children are provided with vaccination and medicine, free of cost. The school also arranges E.N.T and health care camps. For new or would-be mothers, the school also arranges prenatal and post natal camps, where the doctors provide them with important information related to wellness and hygiene.

The founder of Harmony House, Lucy Bruce, was awarded the prestigious Emirates Woman of the Year award in the Humanitarian category, in November 2010. Currently living in Dubai with her husband, Lucy is in India every two months, to be a part of Harmony House in person. With increasing requests for admissions, the House is looking to expand—and will add 70 children over the next few months.

"We have seen a lot of positive change in our children—from developing good manners, to improving in their subjects, and learning. Apart from the improvement in them, we have seen great improvement in the behaviour and response of the parents. And what can be more satisfying than when a child comes to you and says, 'Ma'am you are my best friend.'" concludes Meenakshi Khanna. ♦



UL NAP: Children rest a while during the afternoons at Harmony House

tionery, classroom furniture, toys and school resources. The House has four main areas in the villa—There is a room for the toddlers, that also works as a creche for 0-4 year olds—where they can play and take a nap in the cots stationed for them. Another room is for 5-16 year olds, where they read, write and learn core subjects. Then there is an activity room for painting, draw-

ing, playing and watching TV; and finally, a communal kitchen and dining area. A similar setup is also in place on the first floor, due to the increasing strength of the children coming in. The activity and learning rooms are equipped with bright furniture, white boards, alphabet and number posters, paintings made by the children themselves, arts and crafts resources, and stimulating games and toys—making



IN UNISON: Children study at Harmony House

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