

# Hotseat

## Charity begins at home

When former teacher and mum of two, Lucy Bruce witnessed the suffering of Delhi's slum dwellers, she felt compelled to do something about it

**You're the brains behind Harmony House, a drop-in centre for mums and tots. What gave you the idea?**

My husband is Indian, and when I travelled to Delhi a few years ago and witnessed the appalling poverty of the slum dwellers, I was totally shocked. Kids sleeping in the streets, tots aged two and three looking after their newborn siblings while their mothers tried to make some money, whole families living under plastic sheets at the side of the road with no access to clean water... I found it overwhelming and I felt I had to do something.

**What happened next?**

Many children suffer because their mothers have to earn money. The eldest gets left with the care of the younger ones and sacrifices their chance of an education so the family can have enough to eat. We decided that a daily drop-in centre offering child care, education, meals, health advice and vocational training skills for the mums would be a practical solution.

**How did you make it happen?**

I've had an enormous amount of help from my in-laws and friends here in Dubai. It hasn't been easy because I have two young children - Emily, 21 months, and Jude, six months. I started the ball rolling by raising money. We got a team together and ran the Standard Chartered 10km run in 2009. Amazingly, we raised Dhs60,000 - and at the time of the run, I was actually pregnant with Jude but hadn't realised! Once I had the money to make the project a reality, things started to fall into place.

**What were your biggest challenges?**

Finding a venue was tough. We needed somewhere near the slums so families could make use of it. But the slums are situated next to an affluent neighbourhood and because property is so

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expensive, landlords were wary of letting their houses to someone who would fill them with poor people. Thankfully, friends of my husband owned a villa in exactly the right location - and they rented us the ground floor, which includes a large garden, at a vastly discounted rate.

**What does Harmony House offer people?**

Children and mums come early and are given breakfast, a place to wash, change etc. Then the kids go to the daycare/learning room, where the babies are cared for and the older ones have their lessons. We teach them reading, writing and arithmetic. We also have a football coach and a sewing teacher who come on a voluntary basis. For the mothers, we concentrate on health and nutrition. A lot of babies in the slums are born with deformities because pregnant women don't know how to take care of themselves. We have an obstetrician who visits, and we teach them the importance of eating well and how to find clean

water. We also provide them with water purification tablets.

**How does it all tick over?**

I handle the fundraising from Dubai and I have a manager who runs the home. We opened in December and have 20 regular children from babies to 12-year-olds. My goal is to get as much funding to our children as possible - and to keep the charity as transparent as possible. We're planning to publish our accounts online so people can see exactly where their money is going. In terms of raising money, my

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friends are wonderful. They help me collect second-hand items and I run stalls at various flea markets around town. I also have friends who have raised money through their own businesses.

**Did you make any mistakes?**

Yes. I'm not Indian, so my perspective on what makes a good environment for these kids was a bit off. For starters, I wanted to provide them with lots of pretty little desks and wall murals - all the things you'd find in a Dubai nursery. My manager kept my feet on the ground by reminding me that first and foremost, they need the basics. We shouldn't run before we can walk. Even things like providing an A/C is not a good idea, because the kids would get used to the cool environment and then have to return to their humid homes on the street. It would make life harder for them.

**You used to run your own advertising agency. How does this compare?**

I love it. I enjoy running around town collecting things for the flea markets. It's amazing how much money you can generate. At one sale I managed to raise Dhs6,000! The rewards you get from doing something like this make it a pretty selfish occupation actually!

**How can people help?**

By donating things for my stalls or donating money for the upkeep of the home. Any donations are very gratefully received!