**Asha 2012 Site Report for Aarth Astha**

This past February, I had the chance to visit the Aarth Astha center in New Delhi, India. It truly was an amazing experience seeing how this center operates. It not only impacts the physically or mentally challenged child or their family but a community as a whole.

When I first arrived to the center I met with Mrs. Jayashree Ganapati, a staff member who has been with Aastha since its early stages and has been a director in the past. Mrs. Ganapati welcomed me with open arms to the center and said she had planned for a quick tour of this center and a visit in one of the surrounding slums in Govindpuri.

The main center today was pretty quiet as many children were being seen in their respective slums and it was school time. Mrs. Ganapati explained that this was different a few years ago. Before it was hard just to have parents entrust their children to the center but now –at least in the surrounding area-there was awareness of what the school stood for and how they wanted to help their children.

The challenges that they face now are on a larger scale. Taking the children that had been nurtured and educated in the comforts of the Aarth Astha school and putting them into the government schools.

Main Challenges & Concerns for the organization and families of Aarth-Astha children:

1. Having families send their children to government schools out of the comforts of the Aarth Astha
2. Once the child is in the school-teachers actually teaching them and not placing them in a corner
3. Educating the families about their children’s rights
4. Right to Education for children with disabilities act

Aarth Astha is in the forefront for the RTE act and is taking the time to not only continue their education with the children but also hold focus groups for families about what the next steps should be for their children. When a parent spends their hard earned money and to send their disabled child to school they want their child to be educated. Right now many children who finally do get to go to school are treated like outcasts by teachers and are not taught anything. This has been a negative effect for the families and after Aarth Astha don’t want to send their children to school.

The NGO must now focus on the surrounding school systems so that there is teacher education. A focus on special education and how to teach children with disabilities is one thing that is lacking or rarely found. The last thing that should happen is having the so the child once again feel like he or she is not included.

Asha’s support helps to ensure that the grassroots movement still continues. Currently the NGO receives 1/3 of its monetary support from Asha.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------After learning about the challenges the organization faces, Mrs. Ganapati really wanted me to see what education takes place before children are sent to government schools. We went Lalkuan, a slum village close to the city.

Here I was able to see a class taking place with Priya, a child with mental disabilities and some of her friends. What was really wonderful to see was that children in the community, who did not have disabilities, were also present at the center encouraging the disabled children. Aarth Astha asks the families to send children to the center when they are not in school, so that they can play with the Astha students and help in their development.

Here Priya is putting together a puzzle with one of the teachers at the center.

After spending some time at the center we went to visit Tejpal, a former student of Aarth Astha, who now goes to government school. He is physically challenged but with the help of the NGO and his community he now is one of the many success stories of Aarth Astha.

We went to Tejpal’s home and I was able to speak with his mother who said she initially was very worried about sending Tejpal to Aarth Astha and didn’t really know what they stood for. She did not understand how her child- who couldn’t walk -would be able to live a normal life. The organization worked with Tejpal’s family and educated them on the many careers their child could pursue. Now she is a vocal and proud advocate of Aarth Astha.

Tejpal (left) with his cousin and sister. Tejpal wants to be an engineer when he grows up.

The visit to this site project was amazing. The future of Aarth Astha is promising and with the help of Asha this NGO can continue to grow and flourish.

Prianka Malhotra