

## **Asha for Education Internship**

### ***Navsarjan Trust in Gujarat, India***

I spent six weeks working for an Indian social enterprise entitled Navsarjan Trust. I was connected with Navsarjan through Asha for Education's Internship program. Prior to interning for Navsarjan Trust, I spent four years working as a financial analyst for General Electric. After this internship, I will be pursuing my Masters in Business Administration from Kellogg School of Management located in Illinois, USA.

Navsarjan Trust is a grassroots Dalit organization founded in 1989 which aims to eliminate discrimination based on untouchability practices. Its mission is to ensure equality of status and opportunities for all regardless of caste, class, or gender.

The name Dalit is a designation of the group of people that were considered 'untouchable' according to the caste system, which organizes citizens by social class (see Appendix 1). Albeit the caste system has been officially abolished by the Indian government, Dalits suffer a considerable amount of discrimination and prejudice. Some frequent forms of discrimination are: segregation in public facilities (temples, schools, etc.), caste based occupation and hate crimes (physical, sexual, and fatal abuse).

Now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> year of operation, Navsarjan has multiple programming focuses. Although distinctly different, each program strongly promotes the empowerment of Dalits. The issues covered are: minimum wages, land rights, manual scavenging eradication, local governance, women's rights and youth awareness/empowerment. One such program related to youth empowerment is Dalit Shakti Kendra (DSK), a vocational school located in Nani Devti, Gujarat.

DSK offers its students a three month course with certified training of a specific skill. The school is open to all Dalit children ranging from 12 to early twenties. The courses are offered with the intention that the graduates will take this skill back to their homes and launch a business or secure a job that puts their skill to use. In addition to the vocational course, students get a well-rounded experience through activities such as diary writing, business plan contests, and elocution competitions. The graduates not only gain the tangible vocational skills, but also leave with an invigorated sense of optimism and improved self-confidence, along with strong a set of leadership skills.

My six weeks were spent at Dalit Shakti Kendra. While I was there, there were 150 girls in attendance, all enrolled in a specific vocational course (computers/spoken English, photography, videography, carpentry, tailoring, cell phone repairing, and cosmetology). My responsibilities were two-fold: to teach the Spoken English course and to assist in securing grant funds.

My work with teaching was the core of my internship. I taught two courses to 15 students. I focused on basic speaking skills, which was challenging given the varying level of English each of the students had. I also quickly noticed that each of my students had a severe lack of confidence (in comparison to similar aged non-Dalit children). Consequently, in addition to teaching English, I made it a priority to teach my girls some important lessons in confidence, leadership, and conquering fear.

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I quickly learned that playing games with my students was an effective way to achieve all of what I was attempting to do – teaching English and interpersonal skills! We had speech contests, play acting, and story-telling. We even enjoyed playing some American word games like Hangman and Scrabble.

However, the teaching experience did not only benefit the students. I walked away a transformed person. Tangibly speaking, my Gujarati speaking ability improved drastically since I taught the majority of the English concepts to the students in Gujarati. Additionally, having had limited experience teaching before DSK, my patience grew tremendously. Transitioning from Corporate America, where all of my interpersonal interactions were with adults my age or older, working with children was initially a challenge. I found that showing my own vulnerability and relating to them on their level was an extremely effective way of teaching English as well as some 'life lessons'. My class and I had a very fun time together, and leaving them was one of the most difficult farewells I have ever had.

My work with grants was equally valuable. Before Navsarjan, I had no exposure whatsoever to the operational structure behind non-profits. Given my financial background, I was keenly interested to see how such a large non-profit organized its budget. I learned that the majority of Navsarjan is supported by international grants. Securing grant funds is an involved process. Beginning with an involved grant application, the Navsarjan Director then spends a majority of her time on external communication with the donor organizations.

I learned that the key behind securing this funding is the marketing employed to convince the donor of the strong mission that the organization supports and the importance of the activities that require their funds. I had the opportunity to partake in one donor's visit to DSK. It was extremely interesting for me to see. As a business student I immediately compared the visit to a customer-seller relationship. Where the 'seller' (Navsarjan staff) had to 'pitch' their business idea and make the 'customer' (donor) satisfied that their investment was being wisely spent. I successfully assisted Navsarjan submit three grant applications as well as helping to strengthen its long-standing relationship with Asha for Education, a current donor.

Another interesting point I learned that most social enterprise has a three year planning cycle. This is a result of the fact that most funding is granted for three years. Consequently as the planner of an organization, one is forced to have a relatively long term outlook since revenue is heavily dependent on long term relationships with investors rather than day to day revenue.

Also during my time at Navsarjan, I took a field visit to a Navsarjan school in Sami and local residents in Vadhala. There, I gained a perspective from teachers, parents and some children who graduated from DSK. I also attended the annual Navsarjan Chotte Bhim Competition, a drama contest that provides Dalit children with a creative outlet to promote awareness, unity, and self-confidence (separate article on pg. 4).

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with DSK and Navsarjan Trust. I now have a better appreciation for the strong sense of community Dalits possess despite the struggles they face. I also have a better understanding of how non-profits operate and have a strong appreciation for the

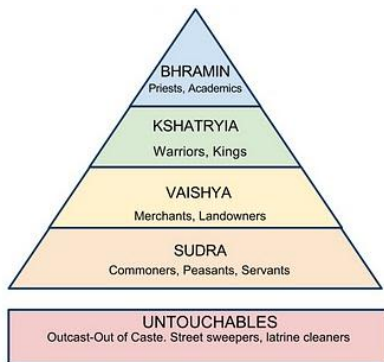
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importance of business/budget planning and strong external focus/communication in a social enterprise.

On my last day, I gave my students a globe and the following reminder: “The world is in your hands. Dream Big. Love All.” My experience at Navsarjan will forever be a personal reminder that no dream is too big to achieve and that I am committed to building my career social enterprise.



#### Appendix 1:



### **Chhote Bhim Competition: 'Little Bhims make Big Statements through Theater'**

A 7 year old girl wearing a beautiful green Indian dress walked right past me with the biggest smile I have ever seen. I was left unsure if her smile was from excitement to be performing or if she knew my Indian outfit was a façade covering up my American self. From that exchange of cross-cultural smiles, I knew that my experience at Chhote Bhim was going to be unforgettable.

I was seated in the first row of a large auditorium. I could feel the energy buzzing in the room as families and children of the Chhote Bhim Competition filed into the room for a long night of drama-filled competition.

Now in its third year of operation, Chhote Bhim is a drama competition aimed to provide Dalit children a creative outlet with which they can practice teamwork, leadership and confidence. The rules of the competition are simple: judges will award the team with the best enactment of an event from Dr. Ambedkar's life. The plays also bring a sense of community as the teams are organized based on what village they live in. There were three rounds each year: preliminary, semi-finals, and finals. Once a team qualifies for the finals, they are required to write an entirely new play to compete in just one month.



**Team performing in Nadiad, Gujarat**

Over 500 attendees watched the 10 teams perform over two spectacular evening showings of the plays in local villages. I was impressed with the children's ability to recount historical and factual events, take on the roles of the historical figures, while building a cohesive and entertaining story. Though they were coached and guided by one *Bhim Sevak* (volunteer), the work of art was truly of the children's. Laughter filled the stage and hearts of the audience as the plays each unfolded a strong story of Dr. Ambedkar's life. The community arrived for the sake of Chhote Bhim but left with a strong reminder to remain

unified in the Dalit fight against discrimination.

Creativity sparks a sense of teamwork. Creativity sparks individuality. And most importantly, creativity sparks confidence. A win or loss in the competition pales in comparison to what each child won for his or her future: The confidence to fight to eliminate caste-based discrimination throughout their life. It is amazing to think that something as light and fun as a drama competition can really trigger a lifetime of wonderful benefits for these children. As citizens of the world, it is our prerogative to inspire these children to be responsible leaders. After all, they are our society's future caretakers.



**Team performing in Kalol, Gujarat**