Muskan Report

1 Oct 2010

INTRODUCTION

History & Mission

Muskan was founded in 2007 after the directors of the Mahila Swarojgar Samiti, a women’s advocacy group, recognized the need to address the habitual neglect that labourer and Dalit special-needs children experience in villages where there are few resources to care for them. Believing that everyone has something special to offer the world, Muskan strives to identify and develop the talents and interests of dozens of physically and mentally handicapped children belonging to the rural Varanasi area in order to teach and encourage skills for self-sufficiency that will help support them for years to come.

The School

The school is foremost about creating a safe place in which the children can grow not only through learning but also by regaining the confidence that has often been eroded by years of family and community neglect. Here, education is two-fold: children learn traditional subjects, such as mathematics and to read and write in both Hindi and English, as well as important social skills, such as how to relate to other people, communicate despite speaking or hearing disabilities, and showing self-restraint. Every child is treated as an individual, and has the attention of patient, compassionate, and dedicated teachers.

Facilities and Resources

After three years, Muskan still operates on the MSS premises. Children of all ages and school levels work side by side on the dirt floor of the conference room, practicing their letters and mathematics in chalk on small slates. Uniforms have been recently introduced, and there are plans to build a separate school building. Right now, however, the next immediate project is securing a daily lunchtime meal and snacks.

IMPRESSIONS

The Positive

In the absence of government, community or familial action, Muskan is doing a fantastic job of providing a haven for special-needs children to grow and learn. The children are excited to arrive each morning, and leave in good spirits each afternoon. The classroom atmosphere is one of acceptance and anticipation. I am most impressed and thrilled by how the children all care for each other. Without prompting from the teachers, the older, able-bodied boys carry those who can not walk along the uneven, often slippery pathway from the road to the school. The blind children always have guides to lead them by the hand and warn them of the path ahead; the deaf children do not lack for conversation. Children with developmental disabilities are protected and helped by those more able to manage on their own. The teachers are genuinely dedicated to the children. Attentive, patient and compassionate, they encourage and guide all the students to the best of their abilities. Their biggest recommendation is the trust that the children have for them.

Seema as a specialist consultant, and Dr. R.J Singh and V. S. Pandey are Muskan medical support; normal fees

The Negative

Although Muskan strives to be a school, it lacks the resources to be much more than a daycare (albeit a necessary one) for many of the children who lack the self-motivation or developmental capability to apply themselves to their work.

To begin with, the teachers are understaffed and undertrained. The teachers sometimes rotate through MSS's nearby schools, so the faces are not always constant from one day to the next. Although MSS has developed its own basic training program (including a refresher course every three months), the teachers seem to have little knowledge beyond a basic commitment to patience. There are no specialized strategies for teaching the blind, or the deaf, or those with developmental difficulties. Right now the blind children play with the chalk and slates while the rest practice their letters and numbers because they cannot read or write. The deaf children seem to use an informal sign language that makes it very difficult to work through misunderstandings and academic confusion. In order to address these issues, Muskan also needs to invest in teaching materials that can help the deaf and blind children overcome their disabilities; for example, Braille and sign language programs, as well as Montessori-style counting materials for the children who need to see or feel mathematical explanations to understand them. Muskan should also invest in other kinds of play materials, since many children learn best through doing, and replace the deteriorating number and letter posters the form the basis of the school's current rote memorization technique.

Muskan also needs to improve its facilities. Right now the children sit on sackcloth on the dirt floor of the MSS conference room. Since the door broke off its hinges, classtime is disrupted everytime a dog wanders inside or a child wanders outside. The children are displaced every time that Muskan needs use of the room for a workshop. Children urinate and defecate in ditches along the footpath from the school to the road. The foundations for a separate school building stand next to the MSS office, but lack of funding has put contruction on hold indefinitely. The most immediate project, however, must be to improve the long, uneven pathway from the road to the classroom. Difficult in even the best weather, the pathway--steep in two places and deeply rutted in the middle--is dangerous in the rainy season. I have seen several children fall, one while carrying another, despite the teachers' help and the children's own caution. Given that so many of the children have difficulty walking, the pathway is an unacceptable risk to their health.

The two issues that are most important to Muskan right now, however, are transportation and food. Right now transportation is the school's biggest expense. Since children come from miles away (and cannot usually walk by themselves), Muskan hires an auto rickshaw that makes two trips each morning and afternoon (for a total of four roundtrips a day) to shuttle the children between home and school. Since the children's parents are generally less than supportive of Muskan, attendence depends almost exclusively on the driver's availability. Events like weddings, births, and funerals as well as sickness, mechanical trouble, and traffic all decide whether Muskan will open or remain closed for the day. Muskan requests funds to invest in their own vehicle, to be driven by its own teachers, in order to boost attendence, establish constancy, and reduce the lonterm financial strain of having to hire outside help. Muskan also requests funds to ensure that it can provide a noon meal for the children, in accordance with government rules regarding a mid-day meal. Most children, already undernourished, come to school without a lunch, meaning that they eat hardly anything all day. A noon-day meal is a very important step in securing the children's health.

IN SUM

Muskan already provides an important service for several dozen children in the rural Varanasi area, but lacks the resources to live up to its full potential. Funds for the one-time purchase of a vehicle wil greatly reduce the long-term financial stress on the school, allowing it to redirect its funds towards other projects, such as the acquisition of much needs teaching materials or teacher training. Providing a mid-day meal is the next priority, and is extemely important for the children's health. Finally, as Asha NYC is its only source of funding, Muskan relies on it to be consistent and open in its communication. When there is little communication about funds, or irregularity in receiving them, the whole project suffers because teachers and drivers cannot be paid the salaries they require to continue working in the school.