

Over the summer, I completed a 2 week trip to Sri Lanka where a group of 27 university students and working professionals all travelled to 9 different states and carried out various volunteering activities.

First came the Tea Leaf Estate. We ran an education workshop where we taught the teachers CPR, encouraged conversations about nutrition, feminine hygiene and mental health, to be able to grasp an understanding of the key issues. We then had one-on-one conversations with staff to allow them to feel more comfortable in confiding with us. This further allowed us to find out what they and their students struggle with, common themes we can start to focus on. On the second day we conducted two-to-one interviews with some of the advanced diploma students where we ran primary research to identify issues within hospitals in Muskeliya. Being a medical student, this was of particular interest to me as a lot of the issues we came across were financial issues, insufficiently equipped hospitals. At other places we found that there was no documentation system so doctors were not being held accountable. This is one of the key aspects of the trip that I will continue to work on to be able to find a long term solution with the team.

Tea leaf was inspirational in so many ways but one of the key aspects was that we could learn from them. They have a beautiful system where “success and ethics” is taught and this class is essentially instilling confidence into the students. Discovering this has motivated us to try and integrate this to other institutes as a long term initiative as we found that young children had severe mental health issues. When me and a colleague co-ran a mental health workshop at Saratha girls home, an orphan’s home, we realised these girls are very aware of their emotions, as in one of the stations, they were able to tell us about the symptoms you typically see with an emotion like anxiety, but they didn’t know how to deal with the emotion. This was a home I will definitely visit again to target the mental health issues these girls face. They have all grown up and come from very difficult backgrounds so putting in place initiatives like a book club or a mentorship scheme is what we are working on.

The youth leadership programme was where I felt most connected to the girls and I felt immense gratitude towards my parents but also the education I receive at university. These girls had all been failed by the system and couldn’t go into university so were at this institute to relearn and take the exams again so that they can pass with marks that will get them into university in Bangladesh. However, on my flight home I met a student, flying to the UK as his Bangladesh degree isn’t credited enough to get him a job that he can make a living off. These girls are stuck in this cycle but despite this, where they lose several years of their life to education, they are the most driven, and most passionate girls I have ever met. And alongside this, they had incredible hobbies, like art, photography. With such a limited network to teach them, and limited resources, these girls were building up habits independently and that was so heart-warming to see.

These are just 3 of the places that really stood out to me and have had such an impact on me. In-between however, we visited other places like Varany Central College, Hope Autism Centre, Orhan, Saratha girls, Ohiya, Dreamspace, Serendip and more!

Finally, I wanted to end with some of the core lessons I learnt whilst I was there:

- 1) Families do not want money. When it comes to charity, people tend to think it is enough to donate some money and leave. This isn't the case, our people want the opportunity to learn and be able to provide for themselves. They want long term generational stability and that is something we can help them to set up with the help of professionals in the UK and forward planning.
- 2) They are more passionate about learning than we are! I was so impressed to see how eager and driven they are to learn something new, gain a new set of skills and work for themselves.
- 3) There is such a lack of services like psychiatrists in the community, doctors to treat the ill with respect, teachers with training to work at disabled homes, but the kids and teachers all make the most of what they have. They worshipped us like their deities when we ran a medical camp, despite not being able to provide a diagnosis, or prescribe for them.

I've gained such a passion to give back from going on this trip as aspects like no access to counselling, or appropriate medical care really impacted me. This year, with money received from QMUL contributing too, we were able to donate things like projectors, speaker systems, art sets, school supplies, an emergency hardship fund, webcams, musical instruments, sports equipment, chess sets, sanitary pads. The £300 received went alongside as physical contributions to the voluntary activities

Tea leaf!



Youth leadership programme



Saratha girls