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Lafayette Teen Makes a Difference at Indian Orphanage

By Uma Unni



Isha Mazumdar (left) with children at the Shishu Bhavan orphanage in India this summer. Photos provided

To most, the word "orphanage" conjures images of grim buildings, hungry children and the various cruelties meted to Oliver Twist. However, thousands of miles away from Dickensian London, in a small orphanage in India, all preconceptions about orphanages are turned upside down. This summer, Acalanes

High School senior Isha Mazumdar flew across the world to volunteer at Shishu Bhavan, an orphanage run by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charities in Kolkata, India.

The organization is run by nuns, but the children are cared for by volunteers from all over the world, typically in their 20s. When

Mazumdar first started four years ago, at the age of just 13, she was their youngest volunteer. Today, now going on 17, she is a seasoned veteran.

In most years, there are between 30 and 60 children at Shishu Bhavan, ranging from infants to pre-teens. The volunteers who devote their time to this orphanage help to make it a nurturing home for these children. In the mornings, volunteers make the kids' beds, feed them breakfast, and bring them to the park to play. Once the kids get tired, the volunteers bring them home, feed them dinner, and tuck them in. The kids' lives aren't all play, of course. A few times a week, tutors from a school run by the Missionaries of Charities come to teach the kids. Multilingual volunteers also work with adopted children who are being taken to different countries, to help them learn the language of their new homes.

The children form deep bonds of affection with the volunteers. "The kids definitely get attached," Mazumdar says. "They call most volunteers 'Auntie,' because it's a generic term of respect in India." With Mazumdar, in fact, the kids built such a strong bond that they called her "Didi," which means "big sister." When Mazumdar took a few days off from Shishu

Bhavanto to visit her family in New Delhi, the kids were upset upon her return because she hadn't been there to play with them.

Although the very young children don't have an understanding of why they're at the orphanage, Mazumdar explains that "kids from around 4 and up understand that they will be gaining parents and going away." The children are cared for with such affection that when a child gets adopted, the happiness is tinged with sadness for both volunteers and children. The few kids who aren't adopted are eventually moved to a home run by missionaries, but thankfully, most kids get adopted within a few years. Almost all the kids who were there during Mazumdar's first year had been adopted two years later, and she predicts that most of the kids who are there now will be adopted by next year.

Children adopted from Shishu Bhavan don't forget where they started. This year, one of Mazumdar's fellow volunteers was a girl from Spain who had been adopted from the orphanage when she was a child, and who has returned to give kids the same care she received.

Thanks to volunteers like Mazumdar, Shishu Bhavan has become a place of hope and love. If only Oliver Twist had found an orphanage like this.



Lamorinda Kids Read

Local libraries offer free copies of 'Bombs Over London' Sept. 2

By Sophie Braccini



Marissa Moss Photo provided

The Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda libraries will once again give out books to kids as part of the Lamorinda Kids Read program, which will feature East Bay author Marissa Moss and her book "Mira's Diary: Bombs Over London," a fun and interesting adventure of a young girl who time travels to

World War I London. Free copies of the book, recommended for kids in third through seventh grade, will be offered at the three Lamorinda libraries starting Sept. 2.

"Thanks to Friends of the Lafayette Library we bought 100 copies that we will give to our young readers," says Lafayette's children's librarian Ginny Golden. Moraga and Orinda will each have 50 copies, also purchased by their respective Friends. Last year, the Orinda Library's 50 copies were gone within a few hours.

Copies will also be available for borrowing and can be purchased at local partner bookstore Storyteller in Lafayette. The three children's librarians also plan to meet with their counterparts in local schools to give out books and talk about the program.

Community reads for kids started a few years ago in Contra Costa County. Last year, the process

started with a connection between Golden and author Jennifer Choldenko. "We had a lot of fun organizing the event and immediately met with success," remembers Golden, "so we decided to do it again!"

Orinda children's librarian Lin Look and Moraga children's librarian Lea Stone met with Golden and all agreed Moss's book would be a great choice. "Mira is the young girl who writes the diary," explains Golden. "Her mom is a time traveler and Mira follows her. This book is the third in the series; the first was set in Paris, the second in Rome."

Along her way Mira meets with famous characters of the time, Beatrix Potter and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. "I like the idea of time travel, the incorporation of history, and the young heroine family dynamic," says Look. Stone adds that the book is fun to read and that the program offers different ac-

tivities in the three cities.

Moss will visit libraries and meet with young readers at 4 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 9 at the Moraga library for a journal workshop, and at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 11 in Lafayette. Children can also follow in the footsteps of Sherlock Holmes and learn how to crack codes with Penny Warner, author of "The Code Busters Club" at 4 p.m. Monday, Sept. 15 at the Orinda Library, Sept. 16 at Moraga, and Sept. 26 at Lafayette.

"Another important piece of the program is the time travel writing contest," says Golden. The grand prize winner will receive four tickets to Madame Tussauds Wax Museum in San Francisco and each library will have an additional prize winner, too. Contest forms are available in all three libraries and online. Entries are due by Sept. 22.

Other fun activities include the presentation of time travel movie classics like "Back to the Future"

and "A Wrinkle in Time," book discussions, scavenger hunts, and craft making. The complete program is posted on flyers at each of the libraries, and online at ccclib.org.

"We hope that children can travel to different [libraries] and take part in as many activities as possible," concludes Golden.

