

Report from Bihar 2009

by Geri Johnson

AFTER NINE DAYS with FreeSchools World Literacy-Canada president, Sue Tennant, visiting 32 of 40 Free-Schools in Bihar, I returned to the comforts of home, back to 24-hour electricity, broadband computer access and hot showers, but I will never be the same person I was before Bihar.

The lives of many people have added to my life and changed me in the best of ways. It was not the pervasive poverty, the horrific filth or the chaos which tugs at your consciousness, that so touched me. Unfortunately, I have seen dire poverty before though maybe not as intensely as this time. It was the resilience of people facing challenges of immense proportions, their joy in simple things, their courage to envision change and their faith that it would happen. It was their humility, generosity, hunger for learning and zest for life that touched the core of my being.

The story of FreeSchools, which now has 70+ programs in Bihar, South Delhi and Northern Thailand, begins with Sr. Crescence and Mark Bloomfield in Bihar. That story has been told in prior accounts and will not be recounted here. However, the continued success of FreeSchools is based on the determination of Sr. Crescence that all children deserve to be educated, the service and stamina of Sue Tennant, who shares Sr. Crescence's vision, and all those who have contributed to FreeSchools and/or its related projects.

Saskia Raevouri's journals of the journey she, Sue Tennant, John Lange and John Tennant experienced with the Bihar FreeSchools accurately detailed what we saw. While change has occurred in the minds and aspirations of individuals, the physical environment remains as documented by Saskia, with the sole exception that she journeyed in sweltering heat and with pesky flies—the fog and cold saved us from the flies. So these musings will share another aspect of the FreeSchools in Bihar... and most likely in no particular order.



Sr. Mary Crescence

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FreeSchools is a secular charity dedicated “to breaking the cycle of ignorance and poverty through free education” one village at a time. A preference is given to educating girls. Parents are told to send their girls first and then the school will accept their sons. As the name implies, FreeSchools is tuition free. It offers a basic program of reading, writing and math for 2-3 hours a day, typically in the late afternoon. For girls age twelve and older, there are now five tailoring schools to teach sewing, knitting and crocheting. The requests for more tailoring schools are frequent.

The FreeSchools charity was organized by Sue Tennant and registered in Canada. Organizational and promotional expenses have been assumed by volunteers so that 90 % of donations go directly to the field. Salaries are paid only to the FreeSchool teachers and a few indispensable area managers. All volunteers donate their time and pay their own expenses.

Sr. Crescence was our hostess, mentor, and guide into the villages, the schools and the lives of all whom we met. Her vision created the FreeSchools concept and she continues to manage the Bihar programs. With a small cadre of helpers she finds villages willing to have a school, hires and trains the teachers, provides basic school materials (think chalk, chalkboard, slates and a few books) and carefully watches the progress of the children. She is ever on the lookout for where and how to expand education in the lives of children who have few options in life. In her calm and gentle manner, she does not miss a single “teaching opportunity” for a child or their parents. She manages the resources, stretching pennies artfully, and accounts for everything.

Sr. Crescence is the head of the Sacred Heart Society at the Banuchapur convent in Bettiah, Bihar. She has had an uncommon history, which



Convent and chapel in the background



Guest house to the right of the convent

included twelve years as the Mother Superior of the whole order, but that tale will wait for another day. We stayed at the convent, welcomed as family, and we were blessed with a glimpse into the world of these approximately two dozen women who serve as teachers, nurses and social workers to a community that numbers some 17 million people. (Bihar vies with Orissa for being the poorest state in India.) The sisters are forbidden to proselytize their religion. They live dedicated lives of loving service, unselfish devotion, undying hope, merciful ministry and abiding faith.

No FreeSchool money is paid to the Church, the upkeep of the convent or the welfare of the sisters.

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We find the convent an oasis of peacefulness and civility. To begin with it is clean, calm and often quiet, which cannot be said of anywhere outside the convent grounds. Violent crime in the towns and along the major roads is frightfully common. Kidnapping is a major industry. The traffic is almost unexplainable. The roads, a word used in the most general sense, are often narrow and deeply rutted. Onto these variously paved paths are cows, goats, water buffalo, pedestrians, bicycles, bicycle-rickshaws, motorized tuk-tuks, horse- or ox-drawn carts, cars, jeeps, SUV-type vehicles, buses, and trucks of all sizes generally overloaded with cargo. And anyone who can move faster than another vehicle is passing that vehicle. Drivers are cooperative, yield to each other in a kind of dance around the other and alert one another with their horns. Given the number of vehicles, that means an endless stream of honking.

Each time we drive out of the convent gates, the Sisters pray for the Father's will to be done, and then they trust Him. Sr. Elise, a nurse and social worker, would say that they are doing God's work and He will take care of them/us. Sr. Elise manages a social-health group and has some 150 lay workers. They have not had one worker robbed or kidnapped in 25 years. The goodness of the Sisters precedes them and they are valued for their service.

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This year the village fields were green and fertile. Food should be abundant. Vegetables and fruit were plentiful in the marketplaces. Two years ago these same fields were flooded. Homes, grain silos, animals and people drowned in raging waters. Others died of dysentery, diphtheria and related diseases. Those that did not die knew the pangs of hunger. This year will hopefully be different.

*Village and fields*

The children from these villages and many from the cities come from families with no culture of education save what they learn from their environment. In Delhi, I watched two boys, estimated at five and seven years old (it is hard to tell as they were small—one still had his baby teeth) working the street for handouts or any opportunity—carry someone's bags for a tip?—that came along. For fun they hopped onto the back end of a motorized three-wheel vehicle (tuk-tuk) and rode to the end of the street. They greeted people in English ("Happy New Year!") and probably knew greetings in half a dozen other languages. I suspect they

could count money. They could read faces and body language, but could they read a street sign or book? Their instincts are being honed but will that be enough to survive in today's world? Or might they have to turn to mugging and kidnapping?

One of my favorite vignettes, seen from the car window as we passed through a village, was of three children and two baby goats, spinning around in the "dizzy game" that children play. What amazed me was that the goats were following the

children! We saw children tenderly caring for their animals. Small children rode the backs of very big water buffalo, petting and talking to their animals. Baby goats were treated with care, sometimes put on a mat in the sun with infant children. I watched an older brother carefully place his baby sibling onto the back of a water buffalo. Was this a first lesson in bonding and animal management? Goats, chickens, dogs, cows, water buffalo, and occasionally a horse, lived with the family and made a family well off. We watched children pick up cow dung, mix it with straw and place in the sun to dry, to be the fuel source for cooking. And, we saw families in the sugar cane fields—fathers cut the cane while moms and children gathered and bundled.

During the cold nights, as I lay under three blankets, I thought of these children in their mud-walled, thatched-roofed homes, lying in their hay beds. Sr. Elise shared that she prayed that God would send the animals to lay with the children and keep them warm at night. Oh, that gave a whole new appreciation for the animals!

Another scene I will never forget is the sight of a toddler running all alone down a village lane. At the sound of a car horn, he instantly jumped out of the lane, positioned himself on the side of the road and stood with his shoulders and back straight. He looked like he was going to salute the passing car. Already this child, who could not have been three years old, knew the sound of danger and how to avoid it.

In the schools we saw all kinds of faces, from bright-eyed and eager to wary and cautious. Often girls seven to ten years old held and cared for toddler siblings while learning to read and write. Being their family job to care for the young, both came to school (and perhaps inadvertently early education finds a toehold).

While India has a new child labor law intended to protect children fourteen



Mud-walled, white-washed home



Straw home for animals and people

and under from working, on the farms and in the villages everyone is needed. In the towns and cities, the new law has not translated into practice. Children still work long hours. So the late afternoon times (2.00-4.00 pm or 2.00-5.00 pm) for the FreeSchool programs have worked in the lives of these children.

And even if children had the time to attend the government day schools, there are other obstacles. A primary obstacle is that their language levels are limited to the lives they live. The language needed for even beginning levels of formal education are beyond them. Sr. Crescence explained that many of those who try the government schools often leave in discouragement. Some government schools are simply too far away. And then there is the problem that the government school teachers, at least in these districts of Bihar, have not been paid for 22 months. Teacher absence is a major problem. One is left to wonder if they are working their own fields or other jobs to meet their family needs.

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The FreeSchools are the only educational option available for thousands of village children. Sr. Crescence and Sue Tennant report growth in the Bihar FreeSchools attendance to the point of "bursting at the seams." The afternoon classes, the teaching methods employed and the location of the schools in the village community are winning combinations. Schools intended to have 45 students rarely hold less than 60 and have as many as 110. The desire to learn grows. In areas where the schools have functioned for a few year parents see the benefits and opportunities for their children.



Sue Tennant with Mr. Dinnesh



This self-formed Advisory Board requested this picture and arranged themselves as seen, with Sr. Crescence sitting in the middle.



Class is held in a yard. The children bring empty rice bags to sit on and use empty plastic bags for book bags.

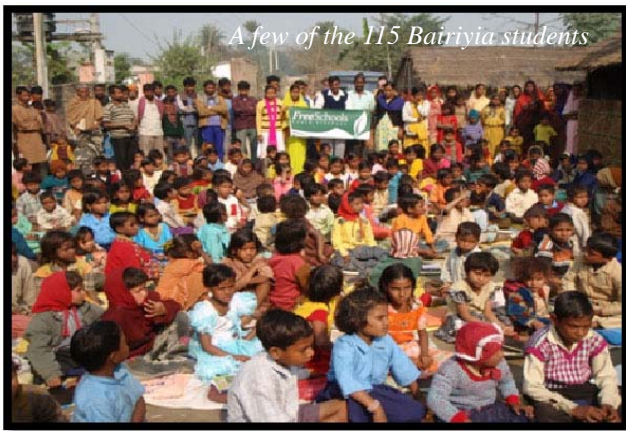
Many of these parents are requesting more programs and longer hours.

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In the village of Neenwalia, Mr. Dinnesh teaches 65 students. The village mothers formed "an advisory board" and made a formal request to Sr. Crescence and Sue for a day school, rather than the existing evening classes.

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In the village of Bairiyia, near the town of Motihari (where Gandhi began his movement) there are three classrooms and three teachers for 115 children. This is turning into a model school. Some years ago the villagers provided the land and the materials (hay, wood and clay type mud) for a two room school. While we visited, a gentleman donated enough land for three more classrooms and requested a full day school.



A few of the 115 Bairiya students



Land for new classrooms



One room of the two-room school



The three Bairiya teachers

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At Tali, outside Motihari, Ms. Manjusha teaches 110 students every day. Her father, a doctor, inoculates children against polio and works to eradicate the disease which still exists in this part of the world. Manjusha comes from a high caste and class. She chose to work with these village children even though that carries a stigma—teaching the poor brings the connotation that you are a

poor teacher and cannot get a better job. Manjusha has a class of students who have attended for two years and a group of new students. She needs another teacher to help her. In the interim the older students teach the younger ones. Before we leave Tali, a group of mothers come to Sr. Crescence, saying, “When is it our turn? When can we learn to read?”



It is very cold and foggy morning



Ms. Manjusha with Sue Tennant



Some of the 110 students and mothers watching



Rajanee teaching a lesson on the need for clean water pumps and clean water

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Many of the teachers are young girls, 16-18 years old. They have completed the equivalent of 10th grade and were trained by Sr. Crescence (who continues to provide monthly teacher meetings and training sessions). Some of the teachers are retired teachers. Some are university educated. Several are nuns or teachers who regularly teach in the convent tuition schools and also teach a FreeSchools class in the afternoons. In the Largath villages, there is a family of teachers. Rajanee, the mother, teaches in a neighboring village, while her eldest daughter, Subhadra, teaches in their home village, from their front yard. Subhadra applies her monthly salary to her education; next year she will attend the university. Then her sister will teach the FreeSchools class.

to pay what the government teachers receive. She inspires them with the knowledge that they change lives and open the doors to the future for children.



Subhadra teaching at family home, listening to a girl recite a poem



The middle sister will replace Subhadra (right)



Subhadra's class



Dharmaha Village near Motihari



School is held in the yard and children sit on the cold ground.

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One of Sr. Crescence's many dreams is to offer a tailoring school in every village. She would like each graduate to leave with a treadle sewing machine (electricity is not widely available or reliable). A girl who can read and sew and who has her own sewing machine would be respected and treated with care in her husband's home. Sr. Crescence says she would no longer worry that such a new bride would be beaten and maltreated by the mother-in-law.

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In every village we were greeted with kindness, hospitality, hope, flower garlands, songs and cups of tea. Many of these children waited hours for our arrival in the cold morning (as we drove slowly through the fog. Some wear jackets or shawls. Many have long sleeves and head coverings. Too many are bare-legged and bare-footed. Sr. Crescence tells the children that "Ma'am Sue" and "Ma'am Geri" love them and that we have come from Canada and Singapore because we care for them and want them to learn. She tells them there are other people in the world who care about them. It is a foreign concept; yet we are there. Their eyes beamed at us and touched our souls.

Our hearts swelled with love, with concern for their welfare, with tenderness for their innocence, with sadness for their poverty and respect for their desire to learn. In the right moments, when Sr. Crescence knew we were suffering at the plight of these children, she tells us that Indian children are very brave. And we see their resilience.



Dharmaha Tailoring School





Above: Regina's Center in Motihari



A school in Bettiah, near the convent



A class at the Banuchapur Sacred Heart Convent School



Gerri Johnson (shown here with Sr. Crescence and one of the FreeSchool teachers in Bihar) is president of FreeSchools World Literacy-USA. She lives and teaches in Singapore.