



The Girls' Dormitory Project

Sr. Crescence's "biggest dream" has become a reality by Saskia Raevouri



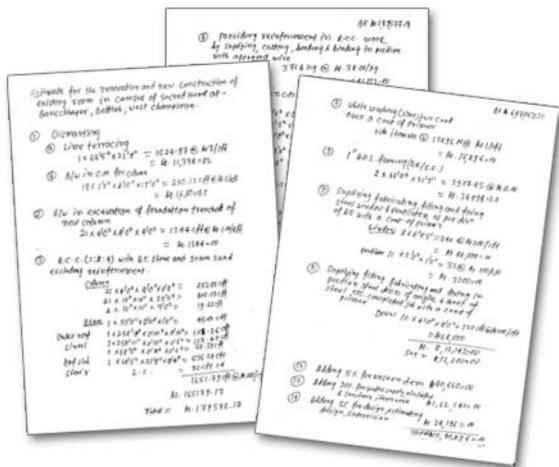
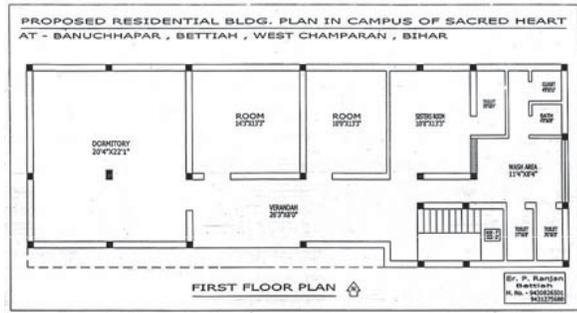
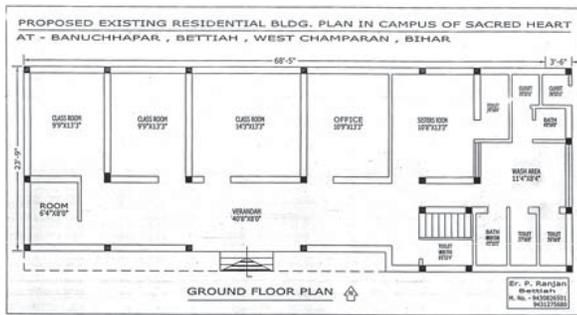
IN 2006, together with friends Sue Tennant and Mark Bloomfield, I visited the Sacred Heart Convent in the Indian city of Bettiah, Bihar, in connection with FreeSchools World Literacy. With Mark's help, Sr. Mary Crescence, Superior at Sacred Heart Convent, had started the project of providing the most basic literacy skills to the poorest of the poor, the "untouchable" children who ranked lowest on the caste ladder. At that time she had 29 schools, and we spent most of our time visiting them.

One morning, during a tour of the convent grounds, we came upon a dilapidated building attached to the convent kitchen. Sr. Crescence lit up and said, "My biggest dream is to convert this building into a dormitory for poor village girls." She told us of her plan to take in fifteen or more of the brightest girls from the FreeSchools and educate them within the convent walls, then return them to their villages in a better position to help it progress. They would also form bonds with each other, leading to high-level interaction between villages.

* * *

In 2007 Sue and I visited the schools again, this time with Dr. John Lange, and again Sr. Crescence voiced her desire to renovate the old building into a dormitory. As she talked, and as we began to learn more of the work the Sacred Heart Sisters are doing in this almost forgotten part of the the third world. We liked their idea of attracting the best minds of the primitive village children and educating them, then sending them back to their people

Top: The Sacred Heart Convent in Bettiah. **Inset:** Sr. Mary Crescence. **Top right:** The structure on the convent grounds which Sr. Crescence hoped to convert into a girls' dormitory. **Above:** [L-R] Sue Tennant, Saskia Raevouri, Mark Bloomfield in the Sacred Heart guest dining room, 2006. **Right:** Sr. Crescence telling Mark her ideas for renovation.



as a good influence toward a higher standard of living. We gave her basic funds* to get started on her dream, and after returning to the States began raising money to make it a reality.

At first I thought Sr. Crescence was simply planning to move out the cows and add some plumbing and a new roof, but instead she sent me plans for a two-story structure (see left).

*Approximately \$14,000.00

On May 26, 2008, Sr. Crescence wrote:

Dear Saskia,

... My engineer & myself have been revising and re-estimating the plan and its cost. In the first phase, I thought of simply how to accommodate 15-20 girls but later on I saw the need of an office, warden's room possibility of computer room for the children, hence the plan needed to be reviewed. This results in additional cost for construction. Now at last we have prepared a plan, which will moderately meet our needs, and its estimated cost is Rs. 10,40,896 [US\$25,000] the copy of which is enclosed ... Preparation for the construction is in full swing. Materials for the construction are being stored so that the monsoon may not disturb...

On July 18, 2008, I received an email from Sr. Crescence with photos of the groundbreaking ceremony.



Dear Saskia,

Loving regards to you from all sisters at Sacred Heart, Bettiah! We still remember your last stay with us here and now we are anxiously looking forward to your next visit. . . .

A few photographs are being sent to you, which are of the Sacred Heart Residential block for poor girls at Bettiah. Construction work is in good progress. Though this year monsoon came much earlier and we have rain everyday, yet we are not caught up by flood. Evening schools continue as normal. Hope Sue keeps you informed of all the activities of evening school. When you come, you will see the progress that has taken place here.

Much love to you and to John and all your collaborators. May god bless you in abundance.

Sincerely yours,
Sr. Crescence

* * *

John Lange and I had already purchased tickets to return to Bihar in November 2008, but due to violence in the region we were forced to cancel our trip.

October 8, 2008

Dear Saskia,

Loving greetings from all of us—teachers, students and the supervisors. We are all keeping fine. Construction work is on good progress, but the speed is slowed for the fund being exhausted.

This year God saved us from flood, when other areas beyond Muzaffarpur are badly affected by the flood this year.

But very sad, you must be watching on T.V how are Christian people are being persecuted. The trouble started in Orisa but slowly the trouble spread in M P, Bangalore, Gujarat. We are very apprehensive, anything can happen at any time, anywhere. Recently in Patna, big meeting took place and hand bills against Christian were openly circulated. I thanks God that Sue dropped her Program. When I think of you and John's coming I [am] uncomfortable because of the tense

situation. Will it not be wise and prudent to postpone your trip in 2009? Maybe the building will be ready and you could see the inauguration, too. Please do take it serious. We do not want anything happen to you, dear. Let me hear from you, love.

Sr. Crescence

On October 29, 2008, Sr. Crescence wrote:

Dear Saskia,

This is by the grace of almighty that you have changed your visit plan as this area is still under the violence. We hope that government will control it in the days to come.

Kindly inform me about your next plan to visit us I think that by that time this building will get over. Till now all structure is complete except the roof and plaster. I will send the photographs as I come back from Patna on 6th of November 2008. . . .

Thanking you,
Cordially yours,
Sr. Crescence

* * *

November 4, 2008

My dear Saskia,

Loving greeting from all of us here! your e-mail message of 25-10-08 has given me great relief . . . The situation is not yet calmed down though the media is quiet on this issue.

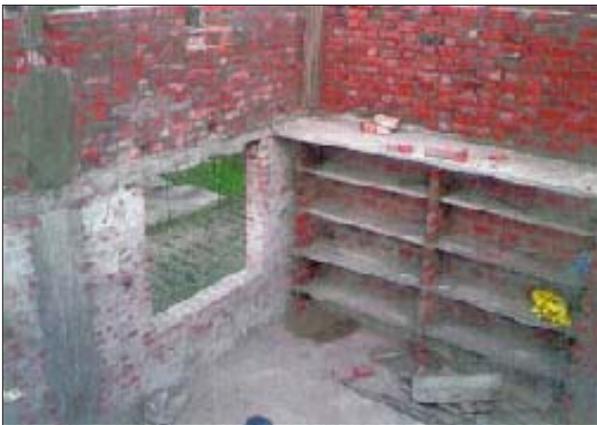
The construction work is progressing. By the end of Nov. the ground floor will be complete, except the furnishing.

Then we proceed to the construction of the 1st floor, just now the workers are in holidays for Deepawali and Chatt, their very great feast. I myself will be in Patna for 4 days meeting. Returning from there I shall send you some photographs of it. Continue to pray for us, we to the same for you.

* * *

After my fundraising effort of 2008 I wrote to Sr. Crescence to assure her that the money she needed had been raised [approximately \$14,000] and that Sue would bring it with her on her next visit, planned for early 2009. On December 4 Sr.

Photos sent with letter December 4, 2008



Crescence replied:

Dear Saskia,

Herein please find some of the photographs of the construction work of the residence for the Bridge Course attached. I am sure you will be happy to see all.

Last one month, the work comparatively went on slow as the fund was exhausted. Lately, some advance was taken from another source to bring speed in the construction work. Now we feel happy to have your timely assurance for more help.

No doubt, God has indeed blessed us to have a person like you whose untiring spirit will never fail us. Please let us know about yourself and John and others. Here life is to great extent normal but sensitive areas are still unsafe. People in those places go through endless troubles especially minority groups. Media is quiet about it.

I am looking forward to tell you tentative time by which we could plan the inauguration of the building.

Do remember us in your prayer, we do the same for you.

Thanking you for everything,

* * *

February 24, 2009

My dear Saskia,

Loving regards from me, Amit our office assistant, all our teachers and our students. This letter of mine is long due because you must be in fact waiting to hear about all of us, about the program of construction work.

First of all, I must thank you sincerely for scholarship money and money for the building. The building work has made good progress. Inside the construction is complete



and we have started the furnishing, such as the electrification, pipe fitting and fixing of the windows and doors, and plumbing. This will take much time, Then we will take up outer finishing i.e. outer plaster and painting once these works are done our building will have a grand look. Then we will plan for the inauguration when yours and John's presence is a must and inauguration date will be fixed according to your convenience.

You must have heard from Sue about her last visit to India, it was indeed marvelous in both aspects the progress of the children in FreeSchools World Literacy Program as well as those of the scholarship children. The performance of scholarship children spoke of great program in them and also of their gratitude to their sponsors. Their performance has touched us much. . . .

[In 2007, when visiting the Vanhoeck convent in the center of Bettiah, Sr. Crescence persuaded the Superior there to also take in girls along the Bridge Course model, as the convent already had

sufficient space. Continuing her letter. . .]

. . . You will be glad to know that Bridge Course at Vanhoeck Sadan has already begun and now 10 girls all from very remote villages have joined this course. Ten young girls are slowly becoming 10 cute angels of the convent. It was not quite a joke to help them to feel at home with the nuns.

Kindly convey our regards & thanks to all our benefactors especially to John. . . . Enclosing here with some photographs of the Bridge Course and that of building I wind up my letter with warm regards.

Yours truly,
Sister Crescence

* * *

April 5, 2009

Dear Saskia,

Let me extend you loving regards from self and from all our students, staff and also the supervisors. May Easter bring you peace and grace in abundance and you may

[continued on page 8]



Photos sent with letter February 24, 2009.

Above: The ten girls taken in by Bettiah Vanhoeck convent, with Superior Sr. Marcel and staff.

Left: the Bridge Course building.

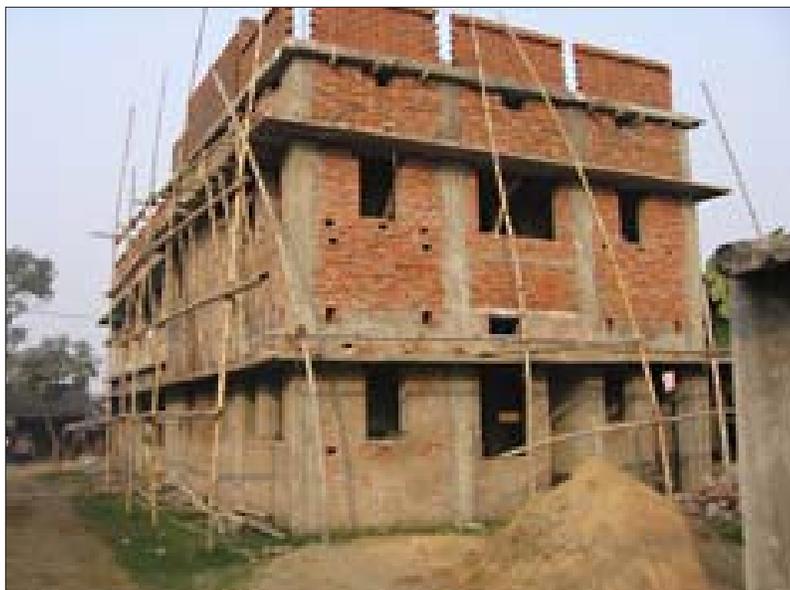
Right: The view from the entrance to the Bridge Course building.



Pictures taken by Sue Tennant, during her visit in February, 2009

The two-storey building has a usable rooftop. On this page are pictures of the main floor entrance and covered hall, offices for Sr. Crescence and supervisors, as well as several classrooms. On the opposite page is an open

staircase to the second floor, the large dormitory for sleeping (poles holding up the drying cement), the stairwell to the roof, and the view from the roof.







[continued from page 5] personally experience the redeeming power of Jesus active in you.

I am sure you must be waiting eagerly to hear about the progress of the residential building for Bridge Course. By this time the structure is complete (enclosed the photographs), some of the finishing has been completed (i.e. plumbing, grilling, electric work, boring for drinking water), fixing of doors and windows and painting and front plastering are yet to be done.

At this juncture, when we tried heart and soul to complete the work by June, I am caught in a very strange situation. Suddenly I am confronted with scarcity of cement. I had to pay Rs.100/- excess per bag i.e. in place of Rs. 250/- I paid Rs 350/- for one bag. Two big factors caused this problem:

1. State government took up projects like road- and bridge- making on large scales. Hence government itself started taking cement in big bulks and factories can only meet government requirement. Ordinary public is faced with cement crisis.

2. State government have announced the coming election in April 2009, the trucks carrying construction material are unavailable. So all the new constructions are at standstill till the situation comes to normal after election.

I am very very grateful to you for the money that you sent me, but due to such situation the estimated cost will far exceed. I trust you and the good Lord, who will definitely help us to bring this work to completion only for His glory.

Dear Saskia, in your last letter you mentioned, perhaps you will not be able to come for the inauguration of the building. This statement is very disappointing. How

Photos sent with letter April 5, 2009



can we have inauguration without you? No please, do not disappoint us. If it is because of money, please take your airfare from the money collected for the building or let me ask from Sue or someone else. It would be indeed good that you and John and Sue come together. Please let me know your convenient time. In the meanwhile please send me a nice photo of yourself and people who have given financial help to make this building.

Let me wind up this letter with love.

Yours in the Lord
Sr. Crescence

* * *

July 25, 2009

My dear Saskia,

Loving greetings from Sr. Crescence. First of all I wish to apologize my self for such delayed letter. The enclosed picture will give you an idea how far the building is completed. You will see the structure is complete.



The incomplete works are:-

As roughly estimated, the expense (for the incomplete works) will be as follows:-

- (1) Woodwork—approximately INR 1,00,000/-.
- (2) Incomplete grill work—approximately INR 90,000/- .
- (3) White wash & painting—approximately INR 90,000/-.
- (4) Electrification (fans, light—approximately INR 30,000/-.
- (5) Contractor's payment—approximately INR 80,000/-.
- (6) To Engineer—INR 15000/-
- (7) For unforeseen expenses—approximately INR 10,000/-

NOTE: 415,000 rupees, or US\$8,700

For exact estimate I have to depend on up-to-date quotation which needs lot of time. . . .

Dear Saskia, to tell you in truth I am so grateful to you for helping me to build this building. Without you and your help, your dreams and mine would have remained a dream could not be turned into a reality. So a heartfelt "THANKS" to you, my dear.

Yours truly,
Sr. Crescence SSH

* * *

October 23, 2009

Dear Saskia,

I have received your mail on 21st October 2009. I am in Patna now a day for an important meeting of the congregation.

Thank you so much for raising the grant \$10,050 (INR4,65,616) meant for the completion of Bridge Course dormitory—a sustainable infrastructure to serve the distressed girls in need.

Saskia, I am so indebted to you and gracefully thank you to make my and your dream true to touch the untouched, to give the advantage to the disadvantaged and giving most to the least.

You have burnt the midnight oil which resulted into a concrete structure for a great purpose to serve the new generations and to turn them the assets of the nation.

Hence this is a cause of celebration and the celebration can not be held without the presence of the founder, creator and development dreamer. We are physically, mentally, socially and emotionally attached to our children and we remain with them in every sphere of life. In the same way when we create, construct and make something tangible we also find ourselves attached with the same. Also when we see and touch the same it gives a great happiness to us which are immense and indispensable.

Therefore, I as a friend and sister humbly invite you for the inaugural ceremony of the Bridge Course dormitory. Also one thing I want to share with you - if you don't come I will feel disappointed and the inauguration would not give me much happiness.

Even then I will be eagerly waiting you for the same event. I hope that you will not disappoint you and leave me aloof to handle such a big event.

Looking forward to see you in the event,
Thanking you in anticipation, I remain,
Sincerely yours,
Sr. Crescence

* * *

November 12, 2009

Dear Saskia,

Many thanks for your Email dated 23-10-2009. you can't imagine how gratifying for

me is to know that you would be coming for the opening of the Bridge Course and blessing of new construction of girls residential building.

The date March 22-29 is okay for us. I have confirmed this dates with Geri on telephone. I will also love to have John Lange our friend here. . . . Secondly also decided how you plan your flight, where do you want me to meet you.

You will be happy to here that finally I have completed the repair of the kitchen. [The convent had received a grant from the Conrad Hilton Foundation to renovate the kitchen.] What a hard job to complete it in six months. I went through a big financial and work stress because the grant was too small and I faced unexpected crisis for supply of labour and materials. Somehow I managed to send the completion report on time.

Once kitchen repair is almost over, I shall put myself heart and soul to complete the incomplete works of residential building. These days very often I imagine its colour and beautification. . . .

Sincerely yours
Sr. Crescence

* * *

February 20, 2010

Dear Saskia,

Greetings from all of us.

Yesterday we went to the train station in Bettiah to send off our FreeSchools friends from Canada and America who had come to visit the children of our Motihari and Bettiah schools. It was the largest group of guests we have ever had and a wonderful thing to know that so many people were interested in helping Free Schools. Amongst the visitors were Sue Tennant, Rajiv Lochan, Anuradha Singh, Sonia, Heather, Hailey, Reesa, Kumar, and Roxie Overaker. Their presence in Bettiah and appearance at the schools gave inspiration to the students as well as teachers. . . . Roxie is a nineteen-year-old high school graduate who will be staying at the convent for two months. She will be helping out in the office, to re-locate my office to the new building and implement a new, efficient filing system, helping teach the

Sisters to use the computers, etc.

After a near two-year construction the Bridge Course project is nearly completed. We have some finishing touches to put on some of the rooms and the roof before we can move in. It has been a long process, through scorching summers and a bitter winter we have been working to get the building ready for the girls to move in. It is difficult for us now, we are experiencing an unusually cold winter but hopefully by the time the new visitors come it will be sunny and warm.

We have some good news, Sue's husband has donated a brand new four-wheel-drive Mahindra Scorpio vehicle to our convent. It is beautiful to look at and comfortable to travel, with air conditioning for our hot summers and heating for the chilly winters.

Please let me know the exact date on which you will arrive so I can prepare the bridge course building for you.

Warm regards,
Sr. Crescence

* * *

In March 2010 I traveled to Bihar with Geri Johnson, Dr. John Lange, Geri's friend Margaret Yeo, and my sister Linda Praamsma.

This was to be my third visit to see the work of Sr. Crescence and the Fakirana Sisters Society in the remote regions of Bihar, India; for Geri and Dr. John it was their second trip and for Margaret and Linda their first. My main purpose this time was to be present at the opening of the girls' dormitory building for which we had raised the construction money. The dormitory—now called Residential Bridge Course Program for Poorest Girls—was the fulfillment of a lifetime dream for Sr. Crescence, a cause that was very dear to my heart as well since the day she first told me about it in 2006.

The five of us had met up in Delhi on the evening of March 18 and boarded a train the next afternoon for the overnight trip to Bettiah, where we were met at the station by Sr. Crescence with her driver and the brand-new Scorpio jeep.

After a warm reunion with the Sisters and staff of Sacred Heart Convent, we met Roxie Overaker,



Above left: The new Residential Bridge Course dormitory building ready for occupancy. Above right: The sign giving me credit. Of course I did not support this project alone but only coordinated the donations of many generous friends who made it possible. Below: Linda Praamsma, Dr. John Lange, Sr. Crescence, Saskia Raevouri, Geri Johnson, Margaret Yeo, Roxie Overaker. Right: Roxie in the new covered porch.



Above and below: For many village girls this will be their first experience with running water and toilets.

a student volunteer who had been working with Sr. Crescence for about a month. After a meal in the main dining room, we took a tour of the new Bridge Course Building as well as the recently renovated convent kitchen.

In sharp contrast to the muted colors of the other convent buildings, the dormitory was painted inside and out in bright shades of blue, yellow, red, orange and green! In the doorways were hung brightly-patterned fabrics and the atmosphere was decidedly cheerful. (The convent kitchen, whose walls had been stained dark and gloomy by the coal fires used for cooking, was now also painted pink and blue.)



During afternoon tea with the Vanhoeck Sisters we learned that the ten girls who had been boarding there last year as a pre-Bridge Course experiment, had been sent back to their villages after all had come down with measles!

* * *

We spent the first two days visiting FreeSchools (described in another article), and in the early evening of March 22 the invited guests began to arrive for the Bridge Course opening festivities. Crowded into the courtyard in front of the new building were the Bishop of Bettiah Henry Thakur; the Mother Superior, the Mother General, many nuns, novices and Fakirana Sisters Society social workers; officials from the town of Bettiah; convent workers; and children.



Top: The crowd gathering for the Bridge Course opening festivities. Above left: Watching the ribbon cutting ceremony. Above right: Dr. John Lange and Saskia Raevouri preparing to cut the ribbon. Below left: Following the priest as he blesses the rooms with holy water. Below right: The priest blessing the dormitory room where the girls will sleep.





After a ribbon-cutting ceremony (John and I together doing the snipping), we followed the priest around as he blessed each room with a sprinkling of holy water. From there we all entered the renovated kitchen for a similar ceremony, after which we were led into a large hall where guests sat on folding chairs and where a stage with microphones was set up for speeches. As an honored guest, I too was invited to speak; I praised Sr. Crescence the Sacred Heart Sisters as examples of the *living* Jesus, doing the work he admonished his followers to do in his name, helping the poor and the downtrodden, and I meant every word!



* * *

The following day we spent at the convent, figuring out details of the Bridge Course program, listening to Sr. Crescence's concerns, and coming up with a budget for the first year.

Cost Breakdown Bridge Course Scholarship Fund (in Indian Rupees)

Teacher's annual salary	24,000
Monthly expenses per girl	
Food, toiletries, school supplies, medical fund, travel, utilities, miscellaneous, warden (1500 x 16 girls x 11 months)	264,000
One-Time Bedding/Furnishing Costs	
Sheets, pillow & pillowcases, blanket, bed cover, mosquito net, mattresses, metal chests	32,240
One-Time Starter Kit	
Plastic bucket, mug, plate, glass, spoon, toiletry kit, uniform, shoes, sweater, muffler, bag, two towels and name tag (1450 x 16)	23,200
TOTAL =	INR 343,440
At the 2010 exchange rate, approximately =	US\$7,500.00

This amount was raised, with an excess of \$1,180.00 (to be applied to 2011-12), and delivered to Sr. Crescence. For an accounting of how the funds were spent, see

“The Bridge Course Report 2010-2011”

<http://www.servicetohumanity.org/pdf/2010-2011BridgeCourseReport.pdf>

With special thanks to
THE FREESCHOOLS-BRIDGE COURSE DORMITORY TEAM

Anonymous (3)	Polly Friedman	Jitsche Nyland
AhLeah	David Gonzales	Mr. & Mrs. Overaker
Dennis Appling	Fred Harris Jr.	Doug Parker
Dick Bain	Pat & Fred Harris Sr.	Theresa Ransbottom
Andrea Barnes	Peter Hayman	Flor Robles
Bill & Share Beasley	Doreen Heyne	John & Jane Roper
Mary Bissett	Dick Johnson	Stella Religa
Saskia & Matthew Block	Geri Johnson	Joel & Eeva Rehnstrom
Elizabeth Chmelik	Nancy Johnson	Els & Cor Schep
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