



Let love grow

Autumn - Winter 2013

A dear couple contributed to the construction of the new Sandipani Muni School by giving all their wedding gifts to the school. To their wedding guests, they gave flower seeds in an envelope, on which was written: "Let love grow."

Love is growing. Recently, we saw the magic fertility of Sandipani Muni School and the blossoming of few young girls. In August 2013, eleven of them made it to University. These eleven have grown up and made us proud. Their enrolment has brought justice to the innumerable frustrations, hurdles and sleepless nights we have had to endure since we began the school in 2000. I am sure all of you, dear friends and supporters, share our smile and hard-won sense of victory.

All of you have tolerated our numerous shortcomings and have not given up on us. Your sponsored child may have been taken out or may not have had the grades for college because of family responsibilities. It is hard to deal with the many needs of poor families. But, while we grieve for the girls who left school, there are hundreds eager to join us and to take a shot at destiny. Whether or not they make it to college, their lives have been transformed by Sandipani Muni School and they are blossoming and spreading the fragrance of their happiness at being cared for and educated.

Your love for what we do and your love for these girls is the fertile soil of these little flowers of happiness.

All the sponsors, donors, volunteers, and staff are watering these plants with their affection and careful attention. Flowers are blossoming everywhere. We invite you to come and see our beautiful gardens.



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Life of Pushpa

Pushpa is a lively, talented and studious girl who was in our first graduating class.

Being born and raised in a very poor family did not stop Pushpa from focusing on her dream. At Sandipani Muni School, she was active in extra-curricular activities that ranged from Odissi dance (which she excelled in), computer training (she is a whiz), to karate (our champion!). Pushpa joined the Sandipani Muni School in 2002, when she was eight. Here, she tells us about her journey from the street to SMS and now to University.

SMS: How do you feel about getting into University?

Pushpa: Going to college would not have been possible had Food for Life Vrindavan not extended its support from school to university. So I am very grateful. As for the courses, I was under the impression that there would be less to study, but on the contrary I hardly have time for myself.

SMS: What keeps you so occupied?

Pushpa: The economic condition of my family is not good, and therefore, to help support them, I have a part-time job of tutoring small children. Everyday, college finishes at 5 p.m. I reach home at 6:00 and give private tuitions to seven children until 7:30. After a quick dinner, I go to bed and sleep for 3 hours. Then I get up at 11 p.m. to study until 2:30 a.m. Then I sleep again for four hours. Another day begins at 7:30.

SMS: Do you miss Sandipani Muni School?

Pushpa: Oh yes, of course. Now, when I have professors who are compassionate and patient, it reminds me of the teachers I had in Sandipani Muni School. It reminds me of their love and faith. That support has made me what I am today. Sometime when I am late for college, I skip packing my lunch. By afternoon I start to miss the delicious lunch that we use to get at school. I am grateful to God that Rupa prabhu and Nikunja mataji picked me up and brought me to SMS. My parents would have never been able to afford the education that I got for free at SMS. I learned karate, dance and computer, I got a lifetime opportunity to travel abroad. And now FFLV is supporting my college education as well.

SMS: What course are you pursuing in the University? What do you want to become?

Pushpa: I am pursuing a bachelors degree in Pharmacology. It is called B. Pharma. In terms of a professional career, there are many opportunities for me after I finish this course. For example, I can get into marketing, sales, or research. I have not decided on my speciality yet. But in all of this, my priority is to stabilize my family economically and serve the society.



Pushpa first from right in 2003



Pushpa at SMS 2005



Pushpa (4th from left) at GLA with other FFLV students



Our third school – a magnificent four story one – is well on his way. This school will accommodate 750 children and will take them from 6th grade to 12th grade. Going all the way to 12th grade is in itself a remarkable achievement. It is common in this society that those who go to school only attend up to 10th grade.

Thanks to an anonymous donor and the Stok kangri trek team we hope to open the school by July 2014.

Sandipani Muni Schools @ a glance

SMS average monthly expenses, 2013

Particulars	Rs	US\$
Breakfast/Lunch	595,000	10,818
Educational aids	421,550	7,665
Running expenses	355,000	6,455
Salaries	790,000	14,364
Maintenance	125,000	2,273
Medical expenses	125,000	2,273
Transportation	72,000	1,309
Administration exp. (7.0%)	186,934	3,399
Total	2,670,484	48,554

Sandipani Muni School

Kindergarten	97	Sixth grade	96
Preschool	103	Seventh grade	63
Girls	1,127	Eights grade	64
Boys	85	Ninth grade	50
Total	1,212	Tenth grade	40
First grade	99	Eleventh grade	44
Second grade	126	Twelfth grade	8
Third grade	123		
Fourth grade	159		
Fifth grade	140		

A Trek for Life

This fall, a group of twenty one Food for Life Vrindavan friends and supporters from London organized a trek to one of the great peaks of the Himalayas to benefit the Sandipani Muni School. Their goal was to climb the Stok Kangri mountain, located in the Ladhak area of Northwest India. At 6,150 meters (20,177 ft.), Stok Kangri is highest peak of the Himalayan Stok Range but is considered one of the most accessible for non-technical high altitude mountaineering. The trek began on the 11th of September.

We are pleased to report that the trek to Stok Kangri was a success. Out of twenty trekkers, twelve made it to base camp at 5,100 meters (16,732 ft.), and eight were able to summit. It was extremely difficult. The temperature was -8°C and

below. They began the climb at midnight and summited at 8:30 a.m.

After the trek, the group visited the Sandipani Muni School and enjoyed serving the children a feast and distributed gifts to them. The children welcomed the trekkers and presented them with beautiful thank-you cards and a dance program on the main stage. Rupa Raghunath (Pietro Paolinelli), the founder of Food for Life Vrindavan trekked with the group. Upon his return, he said, "I initially chose to be a part of this trek because every step would add one more brick to the school construction's wall. Now, looking back at the intense hardship we endured to make it up there, I have mixed feelings. On one hand, it was perhaps physically the hardest thing I have ever done, and I am sore and exhausted. But on the other hand, to have done it is a personal victory and a victory that will allow Vrindavan girls, who would otherwise never get a chance, the opportunity to go not only to school, but to a good school." At a pre-trek press conference, Bollywood star Vivek Oberoi applauded the expedition, saying, "Everyone calls me a hero, but I believe that people like Rupa and those supporting this cause are the real heroes in the real sense of the word."





I have been volunteering with Food for Life Vrindavan for the past month and a half. It has been the best experience of my life so far and I am looking forward to the rest of my stay in Vrindavan. I am even starting to think of my next trip to volunteer with the school again! The kids are full of joy and come to school with huge smiles each day. They have an eagerness to learn and are incredibly smart and inquisitive. It is easy to see how FFLV has made a big impact on the lives of the children. It is heartening to see such a great NGO that is providing so many valuable services to not only the children, but also to the wider community of the Vrindavan area. FFLV will always have a special place in my heart; I hope to be able to serve them for years to come whether I am in India volunteering or at home in the States.

Jessica Garska, USA

I am really astonished at how Food for Life has been able to achieve so much for these children and how, for all these years, it has managed to maintain this commitment with dedication and efficiency. It has been a real teaching to understand that even a small drop of commitment in this context can become so precious. Only the spirit of a sincere sentiment of Love is able to achieve such a project and to keep it alive in the face of all the difficulties and issues related to the Indian experience that we can hardly comprehend. The children have made this trip to Vrindavan full of significance. They have been teachers to me, and when I think of them, my heart fills up with joy and emotion. Thanks to everyone.



Some of my friends and students that have joined the yoga courses promoted by our association have joined me during their first Indian experience. They have all been positively affected and enthusiastic regarding the time spent with the children. For sure they have experienced a connection with the true essence of Yoga.

In Italy, the Raja Yoga association is propagating the philosophy of Yoga and all the bionatural disciplines. It, along with its associates, will start a small but meaningful contribution to support the FFL project. Thank you.

Carol Bonora

Raja Yoga association, Varese, Italy



Vrindavan, the land where Lord Krishna took birth over 5,000 years ago. We first learn about Vrindavan from the Vedic scriptures such as Srimad Bhagavatam and other more confidential scriptures written by the Goswamis who lived here at least 500 years ago. Somehow or other, the descriptions of the land of Vrindavan and the reality a pilgrim is faced with do not match, one's faith can be seriously tested just by witnessing the level of social degradation happening here. What to do?

You can either be a passive witness or be part of a project that promises to make changes in order to re-establish the sanctity of the Dham and its inhabitants. Quite a massive task, it requires manpower and vision. Rupa and the team are exactly trying to achieve this; they are positively making a change. This fact alone is what made me join their team and be a part of a project that is really making a difference. And the best is yet to come.

Paul Musu, UK

A Tribute to Sriman Radhapati Prabhu

We wish to dedicate few words of appreciation to our dear friend Radhapati Prabhu, a disciple of Srila Prabhupada, that left this world peacefully on Saturday, September 21, 2013 at our FFLV hospital, surrounded by devotees and our school children. Even a calf from our Care for Cows center went to visit him! He was a Vietnam veteran and due to war's injury he had a threatening disease that brought him to the Holy Dham to spend his last years. Here he leaved uninterruptedly for the past 16th years making good use of his time with intense prayer and service. He had a deep love for the cows, the children, the Vrajabasi, the Yamuna river, Govardhan Hill, the trees and everything related to Vrindavan, he also helped a lot to develop FFLV programs. But most of all he inspired and enthusiastically encouraged all of us from FFLV to go on with this wonderful service in which he had a great faith and considered of utmost importance. He was there when we started the Sandipani Muni School and he is the one that suggested the proper name for the sponsorship program: "A Gift of Hope". We are so grateful to him.



Radhapati Das 1948 - 2013

Cleaning Vrindavan



One of Radhapati Prabhu's practical devotional activities while here in Vrindavan was sweeping and cleaning the parikrama path. As a tribute to him and to continue this spirit, Food for Life Vrindavan has started a hands-on cleaning project. We are inviting friends and supporters to participate weekly in this project, which we hope will educate the locals and pilgrims to preserve and maintain the sanctity of Vrindavan. We urge those who are here in Vrindavan to actively participate as part of the group. However, if you are unable to be physically here and would like to support the cleaning drives, we have a special fund for this purpose.



To donate or participate, please go to www.fflvrindavan.org/cleaning or email to cleaning@fflvrindavan.org

Tree planting with Rico Montenegro



In August 2013 Food for Life Vrindavan organized a tree plantation campaign in a joint venture with the Fruit Tree Planting Foundation (FTP) USA.

FTP sponsored 500 fruit tree saplings and also the cost of fencing to protect them. Rico Montenegro, a representative of FTP, personally came to assist us in this campaign. During a workshop with Sandipani Muni students, Rico talked about the importance of trees in creating a healthy environment. He demonstrated how to plant a tree and how to look after it. The students then planted six different species of plants: Mango, Pomegranate, Mulberry, Black Berry, Guava, and Amla.

We also visited door-to-door in the surrounding villages and demonstrated the planting of trees and worked with villagers. The villagers appreciated our work and were very happy to be a part of the program.

Here is what Rico had to share at the end of his visit: "My time in India, working with the young girls and boys that Food for Life reaches out to, was a most amazing and rewarding experience. They were all so excited and involved with the teaching I did, and also with the actual planting of the fruit trees we donated. These girls were extremely attentive and engaged, and they were quick to respond to my questions with very good answers. "You have truly made a difference in the lives of these young people who never would have had much of an opportunity in life without your wonderful work. Thank you so much for allowing me and the Fruit Tree Planting Foundation to be a part of the difference you are making in the lives of these poorest of poor young people."





SMS-Reality Facts:

- 75% have parents with income less than US \$1 per day
- 25% of the families have more than five children
- 35% live in huts made of plastic sheets and mud
- 20% had at least one brother or sister die at an early age
- 49% have illiterate parents
- 82% were completely illiterate
- 18% started school but had to interrupt their studies
- 90% have parents who cannot afford to buy them milk
- 60% have parents who cannot afford vegetables and clothes
- 12% have lost either a mother or a father
- 2% are orphans

The Food for Families program was first initiated by two FFL volunteers back in 2006, Nikunja Vilasini from Italy and Richard from America.

The whole idea behind this program was to help those families who actually work for the school and who also have children studying at the Sandipani Muni school who are somehow struggling to make ends meet due to their low income and the ever rising price of basic commodities such as food.

Lack of proper nutrition can affect the children development and also their parents ability to have the energy to run the household and performing their daily activities, let alone to make the body strong and immune to all kinds of diseases.

Around fifty families have benefitted from such program. Once a month, one of the family members visit the school to collect their monthly quota of ration, which consists of food ingredients and food supplies such as rice, cooking oil, dahl, salt, sugar and wheat flour, which is used to cook chapatis. These kind of ingredients are the staple diet of many local residents.

This kind of programme has been very helpful to these families and this is all thanks to our sponsors, friends and supporters of FFL Vrindavan, and we hope in the future to see less and less families suffering from this predicament.



Transcending gendered boundaries



“I am supporting four children and an ailing mother-in-law on my own with confidence and dignity,” says Radha Chawdhary, a 40-year-old widow and one of our team of twelve women who are employed fulltime at Food for Life Vrindavan.

Since 2007, our social development team has been organizing regular vocational training programs for marginalized women in Vrindavan. We decided to train women in stitching and embroidery because Vrindavan has an existing market for traditional clothing and Deity outfits. At the moment we have 12 well-trained women tailors. The ladies just finished making the dresses for our kindergarten children.

Tattva Darshini is the supervisor of the training and embroidery centre at FFLV. She told us that there is no other centre in the whole of Mathura-Vrindavan where women are trained in sewing and embroidery. In this area, the profession is predominantly male. When asked about the opportunities

available to those who learn this, Tattva said, “Whoever wants to learn, we will teach you. This will help you in the future. You can go anywhere in the world after learning, and the skill will go with you. “

We take pride in our women as they are excelling in a conventionally gendered space. In addition to manufacturing school dresses for Sandipani Muni school children, they take bulk embroidery orders, stitch gopi dresses, make hand bags, and recycle discarded cloth by making carry bags, hand bags etc.

The Strengthening Power of Service

Drew Pearson, a 26-year-old Mormon Christian from Los Angeles, California first visited Sandipani Muni School in 2012 for 6 weeks. He was so deeply affected by the children and his service to them that he came back for 2 more months in February 2013. This time he was not alone, but accompanied by Jonathan, Bart and Linnea. Drew said he usually struggles with anxiety, and takes medication for this. But his anxiety is at an all-time low when he is with the children.

After speaking with Food for Life Vrindavan founder Rupa Rangunath about the marketing needs of the organization, Drew felt it was necessary for him to come back with a team to make promotional videos that would focus on the potential of these kids.

These fantastic four volunteers, within a span of just two months, produced five amazing videos for Food for Life Vrindavan. The videos can be viewed on the FFLV website. We want to extend our heartfelt gratitude to Drew and his team. We are thankful to all our other incredible volunteers who come and give their valuable time to the children and cows, and also produce wonders of their own.



Another stepping-stone: Sandipani Muni School turn to school for only girls



When we started the school more than 10 years ago, we just wanted to take poor begging children off the streets. Little did we know about the difficulties we would soon encounter in educating boys and girls together.

A number of issues surfaced as our school developed. We found that as our girls became older, due to cultural and social norms, many parents felt insecure and reluctant to send their growing daughters to a school with boys. We tried to address this by providing separate classrooms for boys and girls. This put a strain on our resources, especially because there were far fewer boys than girls in the classes. Moreover, it did not allay the parents' fears. In addition, there is a huge demand for admission from girls. Taking all these factors into consideration, after much soul searching, we have come to understand that in the long run, we will be more effective and successful in helping Vrindavan's poor community if

Sandipani Muni is a school for girls. So we have slowly begun to make this change.

It is girls who need education the most as they are the ones who, in addition to poverty, face challenges such as discrimination, inequality, and early marriage. The latest statistics support our decision. According to an analysis conducted recently by UNICEF (<http://www.unicef.in/documents/childmarriage.pdf>) 54.9% of women get married before the age of 18. Child marriage is linked to poverty, and there is a strong correlation between child marriage and education. Higher levels of education are associated with lower child marriage rates. Education can play an important role in empowering girls and offering them hope and opportunities for the future. We are seeing this every day with our students.

The younger boys attending our school will still study with us until the 6th grade. Our older boys have gone on to other schools. We are supporting with sponsorships and will continue to do so until they graduate and join college. Many of them are attending our School of Performing Arts where they are learning martial arts and music.

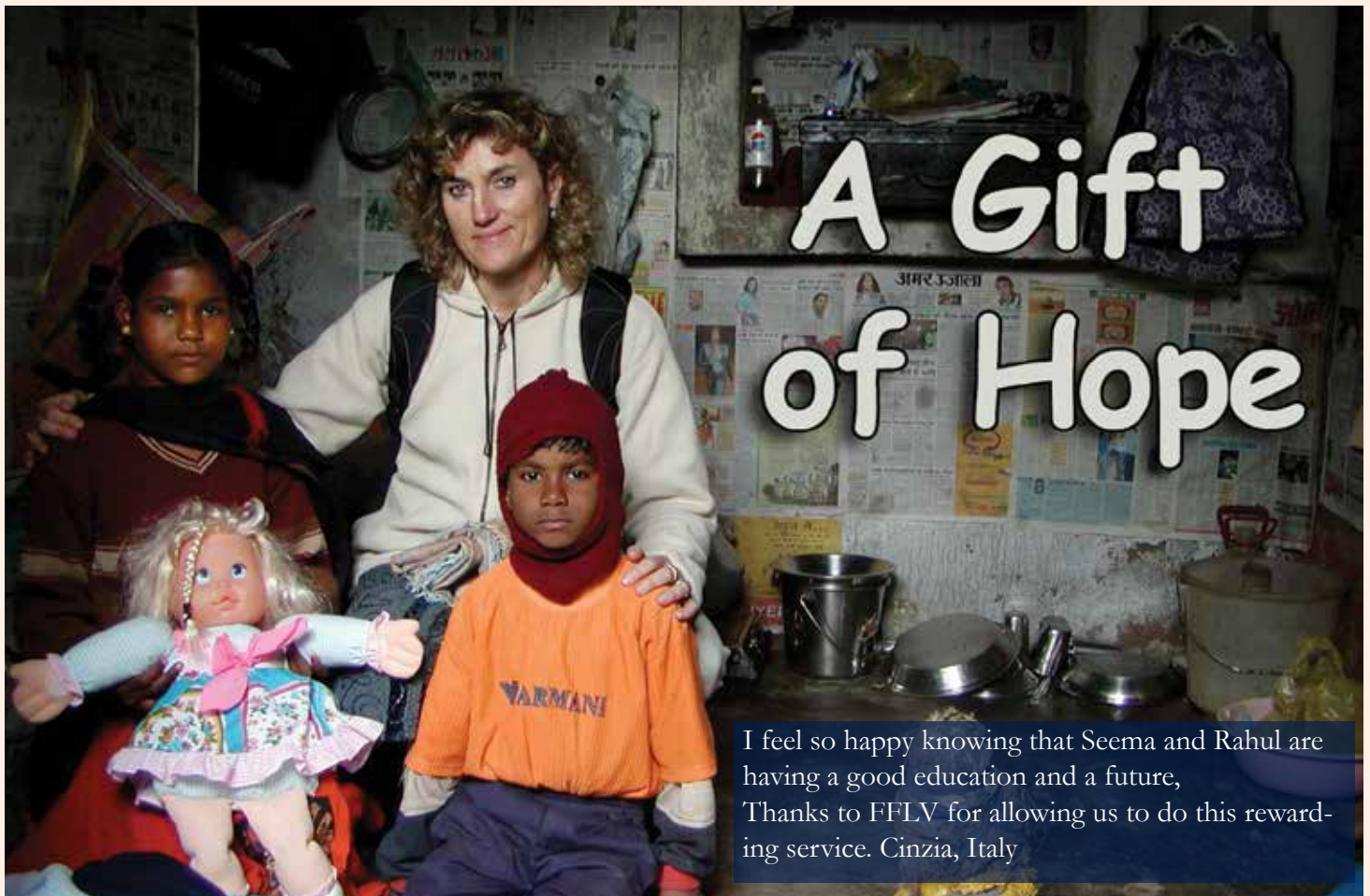
We have no doubt that Sandipani Muni School will one day grow into Vrindavan's premier girl's school. It is already beginning to produce a generation of educated girls on their way to professional careers that they could never have even dreamt of before.

Safeguarding Children against abuse

Although the issue of child abuse pervades in all sections of society, its magnitude is wider in poverty stricken households. Therefore, the majority of our girls are particularly vulnerable to being abused and being exposed to domestic violence. Recognizing the hardships our girls go through, this summer we added a Child Protection and Welfare Department to Sandipani Muni School, since the protection and welfare of children is of paramount importance to us.

The department is implementing a "Good touch/Bad touch" program for primary and post-primary students. The program aims at enabling children to recognize and resist abuse and potentially abusive situations. The department works with children on behavior management, provides family-centered counseling in non-severe cases and legal help in the severe cases of abuse and molestation, and it is also working on implementing gender education. Gender education starts with building gender awareness, or recognizing the negative impacts of gender stereotypes and addressing the inequalities and violence that arise from them. We want our girls to have greater self-confidence, assertiveness, independence and a broader engagement in the public sphere.





I feel so happy knowing that Seema and Rahul are having a good education and a future, Thanks to FFLV for allowing us to do this rewarding service. Cinzia, Italy

Our sponsorship program, "Gift of Hope," offers a real opportunity to the poorest children to improve their lives. Sponsors' contributions enable these children to attend our school and receive an education. For Rs.85 per day (US\$1.50) you can sponsor one child attending Sandipani Muni School.

The sponsorship fee provides nutritious meals, school supplies, books, a uniform, medical care and clothing. Sponsorship also includes a contribution to the "Save the Girls Fund," a financial incentive to prevent child marriage (more info at: www.fflvrindavan.org/sgf). Sponsors will receive photos and biographical details about their child and will be able to exchange photos and letters. For more information about sponsorship contact:

sponsorship@fflvrindavan.org or call: +91 789 500 2936

Sponsor a Girl Now!



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