

Jeannette Purdy's report is given below: -

Report of visit to Veerni Institute--July 13-17, 2014

Jeannette Purdy

The purpose of my trip to the Veerni Institute was to accompany to Jodhpur, and to settle my daughter Josephine and her friend Claire Hagen into their roles as volunteers at the Institute. While it was Josephine's desire to get some overseas service experience, the opportunity to volunteer came through our friend Bill MacArthur and his connection to the Institute. Being based not far from New York, all three of us had the wonderful opportunity to meet with Jacqueline de Chollet and she was able to prepare the girls for their trip with lots of practical advice, including culturally-appropriate appearance and behavior and what to expect when working with the students at the hostel.

Our family had prior experience living in South India when Josephine was aged 9-11. We had traveled once to Rajasthan, but did not see Jodhpur on that trip. Claire had never been to Asia before. Both girls had prior experience providing volunteer service in a variety of supervised settings, including with children and the underprivileged within their communities and outside their normal environment.

There were safety and well-being concerns for these two young and relatively inexperienced volunteers which Jacqueline was quick to reassure us about. We felt secure on arrival in the apartment on the first floor of the office. The staff are welcoming and were very solicitous of our needs. There is easy access nearby to shops which carry almost all the things one could need on a volunteer stay. Pushpa and Multan provided us with well-prepared vegetarian meals toned down on the spiciness. A water purifier, western showers and toilets, air conditioning, and the reliable wifi was a huge factor in how the apartment quickly felt like "home." We are most grateful for the organized trips into the Old City and to see the sights of amazing Jodhpur. It is commendable to what extent the Institute has gone to make it easier for volunteers to settle in quickly, easily and comfortably.

Nevertheless, I saw Josephine and Claire undergo some culture shock during the first few days. The contrast of life in India compared to what they know in the US is hard to prepare for, although I think they started to handle it quite well. The Veerni Institute should expect culture shock in all your non-Indian volunteers, if that is not already a fact, and that culture shock is manifested in many different ways, some of which will surprise even the person undergoing culture shock.

During my short stay, I had the pleasure of visiting the hostel several times, and much enjoyed working with Vimlesh and the group of ten girls hand chosen to work closely with Josephine and Claire. It is obvious that Vimlesh cares deeply about the mission at Veerni and the individual girls who are there. The ten were all from BPL villages (a term I learned from them), with the exception of one, and on average had only been at Veerni one year. Their English comprehension is tentative at best, and this fact was a bit surprising, though not entirely unexpected given the huge amount of learning and

adapting they must have been subjected to in that first year. We struggled in the first days, trying to communicate with the resident girls through English, through non-verbal communication, through Vimlesh, the indispensable translator, through fun activities and crafts. Josephine and Claire had gathered art supplies, puzzles, books and magazines and these proved to be very useful to form bonds with the girls and make the sessions fun. They also had the use of an iPad which Jacqueline arranged to send from the US with us for the Veerni office. Even without wifi access, the iPad is a great tool as it records photos and movies clips with instant playback and a guaranteed response from the subjects--even the shyest girl there was keen to try out new English phrases with the iPad.

I'd like to also put in a word about Mahendra Sharma who is clearly a life line to your volunteers. He keeps his office door open and is always ready to respond and help. I went to him several times to better understand the program and structure at Veerni, and encouraged our two volunteers to get guidance and feedback from him regularly. The goals and objectives of the volunteer opportunity were not immediately clear to us, given the Institute's huge task of "transforming" these village girls into confident young ladies, but Mahendra was able to describe the task with perspective and calm optimism. I think it would be a worthwhile exercise for the Institute to put into writing some objectives for the volunteers to meet, and likewise feel that it is good for each volunteer to do the same based on what they feel they can accomplish. Volunteers don't have the luxury of a lot of time and short -term goals which are achievable can give all parties a sense of accomplishment and completion, as long as the goals are meaningful.

To this end, it was very astute for Mahendra to assign a task for our two volunteers to start up some social media for Veerni Institute and begin a volunteer's blog. This, Josephine and Claire did on Day 1, and their Facebook posts have steadily included more detail. We hope that more people will "like" the page, and that the Institute and its board members share and follow the page. Worldwide grassroots support for initiatives such as Veerni can grow and once you have a good following, more personal testimonials and biographies on the page, you can start to fund raise through crowd-sourcing. The public responds when they feel they are involved.

Upon my departure, I was confident that both Josephine and Claire were well cared for and could thrive in the weeks to follow. I was also confident that they would make a difference at Veerni, which is ultimately what motivates volunteers.

As a follow up to the Hagen-Purdy experience, I'd like to offer to work with both girls' feedback on volunteer's orientation handbook for Veerni, if this would be useful...hopefully their experience won't dampen the desire for Veerni to invite future volunteers. In closing, I wish to thank the staff at Veerni for their time and attention to making my stay pleasant and very meaningful, and to express gratitude to Jacqueline de Chollet for opening the way and inviting us, and for her vision and dedication to the program.

Sincerely,  
Jeannette Purdy  
July 24, 2014