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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

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 Bhavan 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

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

only Oliver Twist had found an orphanage like this.



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[back](#)

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