

Anchored in hope

It is seldom that one writes about something difficult and painful and yet the experience brings a big smile to one's face. I recently attended the 25th anniversary of Anchorage—a sheltered-workshop where mentally challenged adults earn their dignity through work. Gradually, as a life-space, it now encompasses dance, music, yoga, mathematics and most importantly, how to be happy.

I was reminded of my first fieldwork during my master's in social work, which was with mentally challenged children and their parents. I was not even 20 then, and it was heart-wrenching to see the families struggle with their special children, while they themselves were clueless of their uniqueness. I got so entangled with their lives that my teacher would say, “You have to learn to keep a professional distance and maintain objectivity and not get too emotional.” I have never understood why the word ‘emotional’ is often used in a derogatory way. Over the years, at least for me, professional has been personal, objectivity, an illusion and being emotional has meant the constant presence of the heart with the head.

As they say in film language, cut to 2013. More than 20 years later, I am sitting amidst a group of special adults, with their jubilant families, to celebrate the anniversary. While there was joy in the air, it was no secret how challenging it must be to live and work with them, more so as they grow up, have hormonal changes and go through emotional upheavals. I began piecing their lives as I got to know more about each one of them. While in this sector it is not uncommon that fathers abandon their children, here, most parents were so dedicated that they had made caring for their child their sole purpose of life.

Some of the founding members had lost the reason they first got involved with Anchorage—their son, brother or sister—but that did not take away anything from their commitment to the organisation. The special adults, put up an impressive show, whose efforts were fully appreciated by families and friends. When a mother saw her 6ft son hit the beat, or a sister saw her big brother lift

his hand at the right time, or a 25-year-old autistic girl actually smiled, not just their families, but the entire audience shared that joy. And this was a cross-section of society, making Anchorage a perfect equaliser. They all came together for a common goal and no barriers played any role. Wish this was true of the world.

I had been to one of their units a few days earlier and was overwhelmed enough to commit two days in a month for a workshop. Communicating is always a big challenge for special people, who feel a lot more than they are able to express. Maybe miming, role playing or just opening up their arms would make them more understood. Every day must be an experiment for the staff, as they observed each adult, in minute ways, to find out which of their techniques were working and which were not.

From that interaction, I remembered many of them, and so did they, when we later met for the celebrations. I had not been hugged like that in a long while. They were pure loving hugs from strangers, who had just become friends for life. Even families of adults with autistic tendencies, who we know do not relate much to anybody, were rejoicing with the same gusto. These adults never smiled much, but their family knew they were happy.

As I held myself from welling up and unabashedly smiled, I knew my life had become more enriched. The experience of working with the marginalised has always helped me take baby steps towards the person I wish to be and the world I wish to see. Long way, but I am on my way, with Nikita, Yusuf, Kabir, Priyanka, Crescentio, Dilbur, Dinyar and all those whose names I will soon know.

Challenge Extraordinary

Dr Nita Mukherjee visits a different kind of workshop

The *joie-de-vivre* you experience as you enter 204 Nirman Kendra is unbelievable. Happy music fills the air and warm greetings from members welcome you. This is The Anchorage at Mahalakshmi (Mumbai)—a sheltered workshop for the mentally challenged (not to be confused with the Anchorage at Colaba, a home for orphaned children).

It was set up by a group of five concerned parents and a special educator Preeti Sanghvi in 1989. The children of all the founders had trained in a special school for children that they had to leave when they turned 18. Concerned about what would happen next and a fear that their children may suffer regression drove the parents to look for options. Also, since the children had learnt some crafts and acquired the ability to execute repetitive work, these had to be put to use as adults; they had also to feel that they were 'earning members' of the family and not a burden, if they had to be integrated into society.

The Anchorage was registered as a 'parents' cooperative' under the Charitable Trust and Societies Act. The main objective of Anchorage is to continue to provide vocational training and arrange for appropriate job work for mentally challenged adults. Over the 23 years of its operations, the workshop has grown into a holistic life space.

With time, the space too has expanded and added a second unit. Beginning in a garage, Anchorage moved to a member's 200-sq ft room in a house. In 2001, with a large donation from the Japanese government, contributions from parents and other donors, they acquired office premises. "This was an important move. Today, these people can say—'I am going to office'. It does a lot for their self-image," explains Archana Khaitan, a volunteer.

Nirupa Bhangar, the current director, joined Anchorage about seven years ago after a long career focused on education. She says that apart from job work contracts that Anchorage currently provides to some 30 adults—ranging from age 19 to 54 and disabilities ranging from Downs' Syndrome to spastic and autistic—what's distinctive is the integration of an ongoing training and



Crayon Assembly Line at The Anchorage

stimulation programme. "In a lifelong facility like ours, it provides an opportunity for building functional skills and dealing with issues of daily living, grooming and hygiene," she says. The job work is obtained from factories, hotels and other industrial establishments due to the trustees' long association with the corporate sector.

All mentally-challenged adults over 18 years are eligible for admission. The only pre-condition is that he/she is toilet-trained and that one parent or sibling is willing to volunteer for at least half-day a week. There is a varied structure of fees which meets about a third of the expenditure; two-thirds is funded by donations and interest on the corpus. Money earned through job work and sale of products at exhibitions is distributed equally among members. Clearly laid out details of their policies are available on their website.

The workshop also has several recreational and fun activities. According to Archana, these add to camaraderie and zest for life at the workshop, nurture talent and are therapeutic. These include dance, art and craft and yoga. Indoor games, birthday parties, movies, picnics and outings at restaurants—all that normal adults do—are other fun events.

A part of the team's effort is to increase the corpus through garnering donations—Anchorage has 80G certification under the Income Tax Act. Nirupa would also like more volunteers, especially those equipped to teach life-skills. There are three categories of volunteers: those who help with job work supervision and quality control; those conducting training & recreation activities; and students for project work. But most of all, Nirupa says she would like all of us to go beyond categorising her wards and others like them as 'mentally retarded' or even 'differently-abled'. "We need to respect them as individual human beings, with differing sensibilities. Removing the deep-rooted prejudices is our challenge and I would like the support of all people in achieving this," she says. ■

THE ANCHORAGE

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