

“Self-sustained.” Too often, it is a condition taken for granted in Western society. It means more than having the means to pave drivable roads and build children functioning schools. It is incomprehensible until meeting families who have never experienced independence. The number of people living below the poverty line is unfathomable, 25% of India’s population in 2002 (CIA World Factbook). Before this journey, I read a number of papers and articles citing these statistics and of course, it felt tragic. At no point before meeting the individuals who benefit from GFF and the Cluny collaboration did I realize how deeply the problem ran.

The following article is a record of ten days spent in the hills of West Bengal in 2007 as a witness of humanitarian work in the Darjeeling District. The Glenn Family Foundation (GFF) has been a philanthropic entity for over twenty-five years and reached out to this area in 2005 to improve the lives and future of this beautiful hilltop community. Fortunately, we are not alone. The Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny have been deeply involved in a multitude of projects that assist and care for local children, impoverished medical patients, and provide education for thousands.

This expedition to rural India was not nearly long enough to fully expose me to such a remarkable place. As striking as my surroundings of waterfalls, forests, mountains, and rivers was the beauty of the people I was blessed to meet. The lovely giving nature of the Cluny Sisters, unmatched hospitality of every home visited, and the sense of participation from every corner was overwhelming.

Here in the hills, vision and generosity have collaborated to empower local communities into achieving self-sustenance. I learned that more often than not, the local villages have received offers of assistance that have revealed themselves as disappointments. Stories of lenders taking the community’s savings and leaving only empty promises are heartbreaking. However, relayed from Sister Declan, renewed trust and eagerness from the beneficiaries of the GFF and local administrators is reinvigorating the community. The atmosphere is swelling with ideas and inspiration that will change the lives of innumerable people here. Extraordinary effort from the village Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have already turned out results, such a bamboo bridge spanning the stream between the center of Bong Busty and its rural outreaches giving children access to the local primary school.



Meeting with representatives of various SHGs from Pudong Busty and Cluny Sisters to discuss village projects.

A recent project in Kurseong has focused on the students attending the Sweet Angels grammar school. Most of the children who attend this school come from families who live below poverty line and live in rural areas, requiring them to walk to and from Sweet Angels every day. This can total two hours for the students as well as their parents, typically the child's mother who walks them each way. During the monsoon season, mothers often carry their young across flooded roads and landslides hoisted on their backs. For parents who absolutely need to work as often as possible, two hours out of the work day can take a heavy effect on the family income. A family of four or five living on less than a US dollar per day need every penny they can save.

It is understandable that many children will not come to school regularly. The effort of getting to class and the potential wages earned by a child who has a job instead of class deter attendance. The teachers at this school have said that many of their students who can bring a lunch have only a small serving of bread that can become hard and inedible by mealtime. Without proper nutrition and the morning exertion of getting to school, the teachers find they have classrooms full of sleeping students making a learning environment difficult to conduct.

Since GFF's involvement, Headmistress Mala Chettri reports that absentee rates have dropped dramatically to two percent. Credit for this impressive change goes to a number of changes devised by the school administrators and funded by the GFF. They include the Decima Irene Glenn Lunch Program, providing the children

with generally the largest and most nutritious meal of the day. Moreover, it certainly does not hurt that a donated television and DVD player show the children cartoons and educational films every week, bringing color and happiness to their young lives.

The improvement spans more than better nutrition and school attendance. The GFF has also contributed a four-wheel drive vehicle to the Sweet Angels School. Parents have organized themselves in each of the local villages so that one adult supervises a carpool pick up point giving other parents more time during the day. Using this single vehicle, the Sweet Angels staff can pick up and deliver every student from fifteen proximate villages in an astonishing twenty minutes.



A four-year old student at Sweet Angels School about to enjoy her surprise cookie snack.

Of great importance is a central concept of the GFF known as the Model Village project. The aim is to not simply beautify and modernize the area; it serves as a motivating pillar of the entire community. The concept is surprisingly simple. The three villages selected as model villages in the Kalimpong area are Chibo, Pudong, and Bong Busty. Two Sisters from the Cluny Order assigned to each facilitate the

projects; they have relocated to the villages, living among the people there and thus amplifying faith in the longevity and credence of this program. Assessments of the basic needs and modest improvements needed came from surveys conducted by the Sisters and graduate students of the Cluny Sisters Women's College.

The primary school in Bong Busty consisted of two rooms of mud floors without any desks or furniture. The ceilings of rotting wood provided little or no protection for the torrential monsoon rains. By incorporating the skills and labor of locals, construction of desks and cupboards gave children a place to sit during class. A small grass play yard perched above a steep slope has been fenced off. For the first time, students can play games without worry of their footballs vanishing into the impassable hillside. Their gratitude and involvement is compelling.

My visit there was quite a trek on foot on treacherous muddy trails through thick forests. Our reward upon arriving was a crowd of smiling children who had prepared a welcome. I must say the most touching moment took place when two girls, ten and eleven years-old, began their dancing but a sudden power cut left them without music. The costumed girls were in tears over the many hours they had practiced and fortunately had the chance to perform beautifully when electricity came back before our departure.



Bong Busty Primary School girls performing traditional dances. The village created these costumes from cloth donated by the GFF.

Through the Glenn Family Foundation (GFF), model villages are not simply becoming dependent on the generosity of others. With a detailed plan and the assistance of the Cluny Sisters, proactive groups use grants. These SHGs (self-help groups) create employment, and aim to earn a profit that will in turn be re-invested in the local community.

The focal point of the Chibo Busty village project is the home of Auntie Martha, a widow and mother of two children. In the typical construction, her home consists of two connected rooms; a sitting room and bedroom. One of her sons lives with his wife in a room of the house with a separate entrance. Their toilet consists of a dug out hole surrounded by a bamboo structure whose door is a hanging burlap curtain. This is located dangerously close to the kitchen, also a bamboo-mud structure with a clay stove and storage for cookware. Within a ten-foot radius I could see her pig sty and separate chicken roost; it struck me that all these structures should have more distance between them for reasons of hygiene.



**A Visit to the St. Michael's Nannette Vocational School's
Computer Center, Sister Marcella Baidya and instructor.**

The Glenn Family Foundation is giving hope to a vast number of people of the Darjeeling District. The projects range from a fully equipped Care and Support Center for PLWHAs (People Living With HIV/AIDs) to libraries and computer centers for local educational institutions. The Care and Support Center is the first medical center of its kind. The Sisters provide a haven for patients, four of whom I was able to meet there. Before this gift from the GFF there was no network of support for patients so they tended to hide their condition and had no access to Anti-Viral Treatments. The Sisters saw that shame and fear of social ostracism caused many deaths from viral infections such as Tuberculosis that could have been avoided.

The Cluny Sisters simply glow when they speak of their appreciation for this sanctuary the GFF finances. It is a surprisingly joyful environment where patients donate their time and skills to the Center's upkeep. One man was a gardener before he entered the center but nurtures his talent by looking after the garden and grounds here.

He told me that he looks forward to two things: visits from his ten-year old daughter and the months ahead when he can watch his flowers grow.



The Cluny Sisters, local students, and patients welcoming us to the GFF Care & Support Center for PLWHAs.