

Mary Ward International Australia *Volunteer Story*

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To miss a traditional Christmas celebration with my family, to miss the fireworks display that light the sky at beginning of a new year and to be away when celebrating my 21st birthday never crossed my mind when preparing for a journey I had always set my heart on. How very privileged I am to have been a part of a special spiritual journey with the Loreto Sisters in Northern India. A pilgrimage through such a wonderful, vibrant country and one in which I was able to provide assistance, support and guidance within the health care sector.



I began my journey in Kolkata, arriving late at night and overwhelmed greatly by the chaos and poverty that occupied every street. It introduced me to the daytime hustle and bustle I was to experience everyday as I trekked from my retreat with the Gomes family to the Loreto Day School, Sealdah. With classes already concluded for the school year, I was asked by Sr Cyril to assist in the Christmas hamper preparation in which all 1500 students received a gift at the end-of-year Christmas Concert. What an enormous task we faced..... individually sorting through donations of clothing, stationery and school supplies to provide a special parcel for each and every child. I knew that with every parcel I wrapped, not only will the child have a special outfit to wear on Christmas Day but there will be an element of joy and happiness released.... a feeling I believe every child should have the right to experience.

In my spare time, I would go and sit with the Rainbow Children, who were borders of the Loreto Sealdah School. Each of the 150 children had come from heartbreaking living conditions and family situations. As I listened to each of their stories, I gained a deeper understanding and acknowledgment of the daily challenges that so many people in India face. Day by day, it gave me a yearning to learn more and try to assist them in every way possible. Many a times, it was simply sitting with them, acknowledging their presence, laughing with them and teaching them how to read or draw. I had never realised just how powerful a smile can be!

In addition, to assisting with activities within the school compound, I was fortunate enough to travel to rural villages where further projects were being implemented, such the brickfield schools in Achipur Pujali, the Child in Need Institute (CINI) Hospital at South 24 Parganas and the health care clinics run by Calcutta Rescue. It was through these exertions that I gained a greater understanding of the amazing work Sr Cyril and her staff is doing in order to assist the lives of so many Indians within the Kolkata and West Bengal region. To be able to observe and assist was a great privilege.

I was deeply moved when I visited the Missionaries of Charity sisters throughout my time in Kolkata. On visiting the tomb of Mother Teresa, I felt a great blessing from her and knew that throughout my entire journey, she was going to be with me, supporting me and giving me the wisdom and courage to help me on my journey.

On Christmas Eve, I made my way to Siliguri, where I met with Sr Sabrina and the Loreto Sisters at the Mary Ward Development Centre (MWDC) in Champasari. Sr Sabrina had organised for me to travel to Lolai to assist the resident paramedic with healthcare development, but due to continual strikes within the region, this was impossible. This did provide me with the opportunity, however, to visit Jesu Ashram, a hospital run by the Jesuit Brothers in Bagdogra for the 'poorest of the poor'. It was an emotional and touching experience that I will never forget. If only I had more time to have been able to stay and provide nursing care to each and every one of the 300 inpatients suffering from conditions such as tuberculosis, leprosy, psychological conditionals and HIV. I will never forget the pain, agony and suffering I witnessed when visiting a young and innocent 7 year old boy who was dying from HIV-AIDS. If only I could have provided him with a curative treatment. I felt that maybe just that small smile, presence and comfort I was able to provide may have lifted the spirits of this young boy and of so many others, on a day that people around the world would be celebrating the birth of Jesus with family and friends.

My stay in Panighatta was very fulfilling and enabled me to assist the MWDC by doing a comprehensive evaluation on the current challenges facing the healthcare status and delivery within the Panighatta Village Tea Estate. Communication proved difficult at times, but I was able to effectively discuss and talk with local village members and dispensary workers to develop ways in which healthcare issues can be tackled and improved. I was able to provide a basic foundation for a community friendly dispensary which had shown small positive steps forward before I had left. Within a week of my stay in Panighatta, I had developed such wonderful friendships and provided with ample invitations to New Year celebrations.... even participating every night in door by door Christmas Carol singing with the local school children. Such a joy it was to dance and sing to the beat of loud bongo drums and tambourines.

A short break in Darjeeling was a wonderful way to recollect and assess the work I had achieved thus far on my journey. The beautiful scenery of the Himalayan Mountains that surrounds the Loreto Convent was truly breath-taking. From here I continued on to Dharan, South-eastern Nepal. Within my one week stay, I was able to attend daily visitations to the stone-breakers villages with the local paramedic and comfort the hostel girls during their exam period. With such limited resources among these villages, I used as much knowledge and skill to provide information and assistance in patient health concerns and illnesses. Education about lifestyle diseases and conditions was vital and through my current nursing knowledge, I was able to assist the paramedic in developing methods and programs that may help to improve child nutrition and hence try to alleviate malnutrition.

What a wonderful, self-discovering, eye-opening and joyous journey it was. In just under eight weeks, I learnt so much about such a vibrant country, its culture, customs, traditions, values, religions and also learnt so much more about myself. It was an adventure of a lifetime and one in which God continually walked beside me. It is certainly only the beginning of my travels to learn more about the amazing people and places in the world and yearning to go beyond the comforts of life here in Australia and help those who are in need. It was a journey with many great memories, many great stories, many great friendships, and one which will always play a special part in my life, in my heart and in my soul.



Volunteering with MWIA provides an opportunity to gain a rich insight into the work of Loreto Sisters in Australia and abroad. Both long and short term placements are fully self-funded and involve working with a specific project in a Loreto program in Australia or overseas. To find out more about MWIA, our projects, and how you can support us through volunteering or donations, please visit www.loreto.org.au or email mwiaustralia@loreto.org.au