

A Gift from Madurai

The Akshaya Home was ready for its first residents. It took four years from the purchasing of the land to the opening of its doors to the destitute and abandoned existing on the streets of Madurai, India. It was truly a day to celebrate. For those that were about to become its first residents, it was a day of very mixed emotions ranging from outright fear and uncertainty to joyful thanksgiving.

The first rescues started in the early morning of May 8, 2013. Early, so there would be fewer onlookers on the streets, early so the oppressive heat of the mid-day was yet hours away. The first few soon-to-be residents were full of happy disbelief. Krishnan had been telling them about the Akshaya Home and that the opening day was drawing near.

"It's today?"

"Yes, it's today! The home is ready to give you shelter, good food and a lot of loving care."

A woman quickly voiced her objection to being rescued. Too many times she had been "rescued" only to find she was the target for unimaginable treatment at the hand of those who had neither compassion nor morals. Krishnan comforted her and told the staff, "Perhaps she will come with us another day, leave her in peace for now."

Within two hours the ambulance was full and ready to return to the Akshaya Home, a destination that must have seemed like a dreamland to those that had suffered a life of misery on the streets.

The ambulance lead the way with Krishnan and some staff following behind. Suddenly Krishnan loudly cried out, "Turn here and go to the top of the bridge road!" The SUV made a sharp turn and abruptly stopped alongside a concrete barrier in the middle of the bridge. Krishnan and two staff members bolted from the SUV and bounded effortlessly over the barrier. In less than a minute they were back to the vehicle with a woman who appeared to be about six months pregnant. This was Rosy.

Rosy had survived on the streets for several years. She had been maltreated and abused uncountable times. She had been impregnated against her will a number of times and every time she lost the baby in the process of giving birth alone on the side of the road, behind the concrete barrier.

She cried out, "Don't hurt my baby," as she was lifted into the SUV for the journey to the Akshaya Home and safety for her and her baby.

We were welcomed back to the Akshaya Home from our rescue mission, and the new residents were quickly taken to the triage location to check for possible injuries and illnesses. The next step was the barber – men and women alike usually chose to have all body hair removed so they could quickly rid themselves of the vermin that had infested their bodies. Now clean shaven, they were quickly bathed, given new clean clothes and finally a freshly prepared nutritious meal.



Rosie's Street Home



Rosy in Triage With Latha and Akshaya Nurse

It was during the triage process that Latha and I first met Rosy face to face on a person to person level. Both of us quickly felt a bond with Rosy, a bond that she also shared. By the next day Rosy would seek Latha and me out, and bit by bit her story unfolded. It was obvious she was literate in at least three languages Hindi, English and a third language we did not recognize. Rosy had been given a notebook to use for writing and drawing sketches. While it was interesting to see her flow from language to language as she put her thoughts to paper, we were even more amazed to see her writing examples of

various arithmetic operations. Small details of her childhood emerged. Her life was very difficult and its story is best untold for Rosie's sake. Her revelations did provide us with a basic understanding as to how she ended up living on the streets of Madurai.

The following morning I visited the dormitory units and came upon Rosy just as mid-morning fruit and tea were being served. It was already approaching the 106° F level that had become the daily norm, but it was still reasonably cool and comfortable in the dormitories. As I entered the area where the medical staff and Rosy were talking she indicated that I should sit on the edge of her bed and be comfortable. Yes, age does have some advantages. Rosy insisted I share half of her fruit and give it to me to enjoy. It was sweet and memorable.

Later that day I looked out the window of the administration building and saw Rosy bouncing a bright pink balloon from her finger tips. A light breeze lifted the balloon over her head and blew it over the wall around the Akshaya Home campus. We still had a number of the balloons from the inauguration of the Home on May 9th so I brought some out to her. The plaza area was hot but that did not deter our little game of bouncing the balloon back and forth. The smile on Rosie's face and the twinkle in her eyes kept away any thought of the heat. Just then one of the staff nurses pulled me aside and requested we stop playing. The 106° F heat, the physical activity and Rosie's pregnancy were not compatible.

I left Madurai the next day, it was time to return home in New York. It was time to leave the Akshaya home, its 24 new residents and Rosy. Two days later I received an email from Krishnan. Rosy had been taken to a health care center for a prenatal check-up and it was determined that her "baby" was a large tumor. I have lived a very fortunate life, quite free from strife and hardship. I was deeply saddened to learn of Rosie's misfortune, it just wasn't fair. While Rosy was devastated, she used the iron will that had kept her alive while living on the streets and overcame her misfortune. A campaign on Akshaya's Facebook page quickly raised the funds for Rosy's operation. The operation was successful and now she is physically and emotionally healthy.

The months have gone by and the Akshaya Home now has over 450 residents, including Rosy. She has grown stronger and has been very active in her new home and community. She enjoys the company of the other residents and is helpful in many ways in the development of a true community spirit among the residents. She was also very busy on another project that I did not know about.



Rosy Safe and Happy



Rosy Knitting the Sweater

I received an unexpected package for Akshaya Home a week before Christmas. The package had taken over two months to reach me and I had no idea what it contained. Opening it was a challenge as it been securely wrapped in many layers of cardboard and tape. Finally it was open. It appeared to be a knitted garment. I quickly removed it from a plastic bag and discovered it was a knitted sweater and scarf, both made by Rosy. The package included a photograph of Rosy working on her project, knitting the sweater, and a hand written note from her.

Dear Grandpa Edward

I am happy here. You are doing well? I am alright. Here I now am sending your sweater and scarf which was done by me as a token of love for you.

With love Rosy



Ed Wearing Rosie's Gift

As I mentioned earlier, I have had a most fortunate life and I have received a number of memorable gifts. The sweater and scarf from Rosy are amongst the most memorable. The love and effort she put into her gift are much appreciated and will long be cherished.

I will be visiting the Akshaya Home in late January, 2014. Seeing Rosy again will be a joyful reunion.

Ed DiTomas, December 21, 2013