

Of a Rare Kind

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The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act of 2000 makes considerable provisions to fulfill its objective. Children below 18 years of age who are reportedly without a secure home are governed by this act. They are sent to live in rescue-homes, shelter-homes, or orphanages, as their case may be. Once a child completes 18 years of age, he/she is deemed to be old enough to take care of him/herself. If one has even the slightest idea of what it is like to live in an orphanage or a similar home, one would definitely know that they do not exactly offer the most conducive environment for a child to grow up in.

Khushboo Kantharia, founder of Caravan Life (popularly known as Disha Foundation) tells us how vastly different the lives of children in institutional set ups are, as compared to those children who live in their natural families. An Ashoka Youth Venture Fellow, Khushboo founded this organization in (2009), as a support structure to help children, especially girls of the 16-18 years bracket, to reintegrate them with the rest of the society.

“Life in an institution is a life of few needs, all of which are already fulfilled. Everything circles around the ringing of a single bell. When the bell rings, you wake up; when the bell rings you eat, or sleep, or wash clothes, and so on. All that one needs for bare minimum existence is given. There is no scope or room for choice,” says Khushboo, continuing her argument, “As soon as a child completes 18 years of age, he/she is sent out into the big world, without a clue of what they need to do with themselves. The child does not even know that he/she has an individual personality, leave alone that he/she is of some worth to the world around them.”

Khushboo, through her organization reaches out to girls in several child care institutions in Maharashtra, and trains them on life-skills; healing therapies; goal-orientation; and planning and focus, so that they may start their independent lives with confidence, determination, and dignity. “Life for a single woman is full of challenges. In cities like Mumbai, there is every chance that a young woman is either prone to lurking dangers to her safety, or to the spiteful remarks of unkindly neighbours. She has to constantly fight against the tide even to coexist in her neighborhood. We believe that every girl is perfectly capable of carving a meaningful life for herself. We merely play the role of a facilitator, and open their minds to see opportunities in the world outside. It is up

to them to decide what is best for their course of life,” says Khushboo.

Principle of self-determination of individuals is easy to comprehend, but hard to internalize and actually practice. However, that seems to be the reigning principle behind Khushboo’s many initiatives. All of 22 years, she has taken on the mantle of leadership to rare heights already. The inspiration for all of her work springs from a deeply touching experience.

Khushboo was born into a wealthy family in Surat. When her mother died, due to various reasons, she was sent into a shelter home. She was 17 years old then. It was here she saw how utterly cut-off institutions are from a regular environment. She says: “Living in a shelter home, I met girls who were brought into the home as infants. They had never seen

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the outside world and therefore their awareness about things were far lower than that of children who were brought up in a regular household. For instance, they did not know how to use money, or how to travel independently, or how to mingle with boys. When such children came out of the institution, the world seemed as one large maze. It is easy for them to get lost. I knew some girls who would very quickly marry an auto rickshaw driver or work at a bar, just because they did not know what else they could do.”

Khushboo, on the other hand, had experienced life in a normal family as well in an institution. She had seen herself be an argumentative rich kid, as well as the submissive one. In all humility she says referring to her association with the organizations Ashoka Youth Ventures and Saathi, “Touchwood! I stumbled upon the right kind of people and got the right kind of support at the right time.”

Khushboo also keenly observed what the counselors did when they had visited the home where she was put up. This sparked in her an urge to work with girls who are in the transition-stage of their stay in a home, to assist them to discover their own potential and to look progressively at their lives. She identified a group of volunteers, and based on various resources available such as UNICEF’s life-skills program trained these volunteers to be trainers on life skills.

“At Caravan Life, we build a life-long relationship with our girls. The most beautiful part about our work is how it brings together individuals who are otherwise completely unrelated to each other to become strong pillars of support. All that we need have to do is to provide space to keep the conversation flowing.

The girls group up to discuss their problems, and come up with their own solutions,” says a proud Khushboo, adding that, “it is essential that the girls know that there is always someone whom they can count upon when there is a need.”

As her passion grew into what she now calls ‘her life-long mission’, Khushboo decided to pursue a suitable education to aide her efforts. She did a certificate program in Social Work from the College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, and is presently preparing for a course in psychology and counseling. On being asked how effective her education has been, her response is, “Education to me has been a deeply personal experience—one that came out of my own necessity to succeed in my mission. I had started Disha on an emotional premise, that no other girl should suffer the way I did. Now, I have a vision for my organization. I want to be professional in my work. Although hands-on experience

may be a great teacher, it takes 15 years to understand the field. Whereas, education condenses that information and insight into a few hours of lessons. People look for a professional no matter what your achievements are. Thanks to my education, I can now start new centres of Caravan Life, the next two being planned in Uttarakhand and Gujarat. We will shortly start working with boys as well. Also, we will be customizing all our programs to suit the individual needs of every child care institution that we work with.”

Another side of Khushboo’s vibrant personality is her interest in adventure sports. The spirit of adventure and independence that she radiates is palpable and infectious. Perhaps that is where her practical, “no-free lunch” attitude towards her organization also comes from. “We go trekking to well-researched jungle areas where we deliberately keep a distance of 5 to 6 feet between two individuals. Our girls nurse fears of all kinds and initially they feel utterly lost in the solitude and nothingness of the jungle. Some shout and some scream to be let out, but we move on until they finish their course. This activity is necessary for our girls to unwind. That is where they actually get rid of their doubts, fears, and inertia. When they are done, they keep asking for more such treks!” chuckles Khushboo, who is also getting a certificate for being an adventure sports facilitator and dance movement therapist.

As she recalls one of her most profound successes, she says, “One of my girls, after a particularly tiring trek, woke me up at the middle of the night and walked me into a deep pocket of the jungle. There, under the starry sky, she started pouring her heart about all things sundry. She spoke and spoke and I listened until the sky lit up at dawn. That to me is an important landmark.”

For Khushboo, her biggest success is when a girl, whether a victim of rape or trafficking, comes to her one day to show off proudly the stars she received at her employee-assessment time at work. That, she says is equivalent to getting an Oscar!

As she signs off, Khushboo leaves us with one piece of advice, “As and when possible, let someone know that you sincerely believe in them. It works magic for their self-esteem. I know it works, because someone told me they believed in me, and that sent my spirits flying ever since. I salute such people.”

So do we!

—Archanaa R.