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The street girls of India were just little girls after all

by Paul Wilkes

Soul Seeing

They stopped at the doorway.

It was dark within, damp, with chunks of concrete on the floor. They had been in such places before, many times. They knew to be wary. What danger might lurk inside if they dared to go farther?

But today it was different. I felt a tiny hand in my right hand, then my left. Tentatively, we moved forward, their flip-flops crunching across the rough floor, echoing from the bare walls.

Slowly, so very slowly, small but brightening smiles washed over their faces.

These were my children -- adopted, in a way -- the street girls of India. They had slept in buildings under construction before -- there are so many in booming India -- stealthily sneaking in as workers left, quickly leaving before they arrived the next morning. But this was not to be a temporary, furtive shelter. It would soon be their home in Secunderabad, India.

They led me to the light, a window opening, to see what they would view each morning when they awoke. They ran their free hands over the thin shelf of poured concrete -- this would be their cubby, holding their few possessions. Ah, but it would have a lock. And they, and they alone, would hold the key.

Strange, that I was standing here with them, no longer a reporter telling a story, but rather a partner with them in their quest for a safe refuge from the angry and dangerous streets of India.

It began, as most wonderful things in our lives, by sheer chance. Or perhaps because of that Mischievous One who, every so often, whispers softly and tantalizingly, "Something interesting going on ... hold on for a minute ... slow down, friend ... take a look ..." (What reporter can resist that?)

I was a tourist in India in 2006, brought by accident to an orphanage run by Salesian sisters. A little girl stood before me, her eye a swirl of dead tissue. Blinded. To make her a "better" beggar. My wince. Her smile. One chapter of my life was coming to an end, another was opening.

The desire was unfocused, a strategic plan lacking, but I wanted to do something for her and her friends, the orphaned, neglected and abandoned ones. Ten dollars here, a hundred there, somehow the donations came in. I started a nonprofit, calling it Home of Hope, the English version of Prathyasha Bhavan, the Hindi name for her shelter. And today Secunderabad is the site of one of four orphanages we have built in India. Five hundred girls -- a half dozen of them with me right now -- would not be raped or beaten or murdered. They would not be chattel in the sex trade. They would be safe with the sisters, eat healthily, and go to school. They would have the opportunity for a productive, dignified life.

For the next few months my girls would still be sleeping, jammed in, as they have been for too many years, head to head, in rows on another concrete floor, this in an upper room of a tiny house. Sixty-five of them. But soon, this would be their home. They would have a bed, a luxury few of them had ever experienced.

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Farther into the room they walked, now more confident, letting go of my hand. They were in *their* place now. Their eyes moved from unfinished wall to unfinished wall, as if standing in a palace. So grand, so large; somehow they were already seeing it, filled with the bunk beds they had only seen in pictures, a bright bedspread that they would be able to choose. A pillow, a soft pillow to lay their heads.

They stood atop the mounds of cement and sand that would soon be leveled into a fine, smooth floor that they would keep clean, oh so clean. They were just little girls after all -- who could resist such a vantage point, such a feeling of majesty? For once they could look down, not be looked down upon.

The years before, my life before, had been filled with its own moments. Standing to applause at receiving an award, seeing my byline in *The New Yorker*, on the spine of a book, many books.

But there was none of that at this moment, just two little hands finding mine once more as we headed for the doorway. A gaze back, as if to make sure it was real. Then, looking up at me, another kind of smile, at once so simple and shy, yet so radiant, a message from the heart and soul of girls who were about to have their first real home.

[Paul Wilkes founded Homes of Hope India in 2006. Learn more about his work in India at www.homesofhopeindia.org.]

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