

The Master Tailor and other stories from WAG CHELSEA

The President of WAG Chelsea is somewhat reminiscent of Bertie Wooster's beloved aunt Dalhia; the bonhomous though somewhat brusque lady who is described by her nephew as having a voice capable of calling the cattle home across the Sands of Dee.

Doe Nair is a big woman with a big voice and, judging by the way children react to her, a lady with a big heart as well. That she and her colleagues are army wives is evident. She had a tendency to call a spade a *bloody* spade and stick to her guns even in the line of fire. This is what makes her and therefore her organisation's style of working refreshingly pragmatic and non-cloying.

WAG Chelsea is not about charity it is about helping people help themselves; the beneficiaries are put through the paces but the organisation runs alongside, egging them on at every step. A philosophy, quite in synch with the spirit of the USAID-funded SAMARTH program being implemented by the organisation.

WAG CHELSEA was started in 1992 by a group of Army wives who adopted a government school in Noida and worked with about 700 children for two years. Thereafter, it registered itself as an NGO and formalised its journey with the poor and the marginalised, especially children.

Today, WAG CHELSEA works on a variety of issues: HIV, reproductive health, sex and sexuality in school, adult education, education for the girl child and crèches for the children of slum dwellers.

As a part of its HIV initiatives, it runs interventions and awareness programmes as also programmes to create an enabling environment for PLHIVs (Person Living with HIV).

SAMARTH is one such intervention. Supported by FHI and USAID, it offers home-based care and support to the families of HIV infected and affected children. The logic is simple: childhood years are the most important ones in the life of an individual and also the most vulnerable. A child who is positive needs all the love and support he or she can get from the family as well as the immediate community. This is vital not just for physical wellbeing but also from the psychological point of view. Which is why sick children are better off being cared for at home.

However while care at home is a great idea, the circumstances of most of these children are not conducive to voluntary home care. In most cases they do not even have an environment conducive to development.

The SAMARTH programme therefore also provides the children with Life Education Skills, nutritional and educational support, recreational avenues and psychosocial support to help children lead a qualitatively better life. These sound like run of the mill programme objectives but they take on a very different hue when implemented on ground zero.

A case in point is the story of Tanveer a teenager who the WAG staff, fondly refer to as the master tailor because of his obvious skills. Tanveer, the eldest of three siblings lost his parents to HIV. They died unattended and stigmatised, leaving behind three children. The eldest was barely 13.

His paternal uncle took them in but he was a harsh man. The children were beaten regularly, made to do more than their share of work and treated with little kindness. Once a particularly harsh beating was handed out to little Jahanara, Tanveer's sister, for asking for more food. It was harsh enough for the neighbours to contact WAG CHELSEA and implore them to do something.

The outreach workers reached the house but were rudely told off by the paternal uncle or the *tau*.

Helpless and subjected to daily abuse, Tanveer ran away to the house of their maternal uncle, in Azamgarh U.P. He implored his *mamaji* to rescue them from the wicked *tau*. The maternal uncle came back to fetch the children but the *tau* would not let go of Tanveer saying the boy would have to work for him.

The younger siblings went off with *mamaji* but Tanveer's tryst with misery began. He was apprenticed to a tailor, his pay taken by his uncle and his childhood dreams of making it big chipped away bit by bit.

Hearing that Tanveer's situation had not changed much thanks to his abusive uncle, the outreach workers decided to change strategies; they approached the tailor instead and took him into confidence. The tailor was a reasonable man and agreed to let Tanveer study alongside his work and keep his uncle out of the picture.

Thus began Tanveer's journey from despair to hope. Every morning Tanveer would leave home, walk to the WAG CCC and have breakfast. Then he would attend remedial classes, have lunch again and leave for his tailoring job. Tanveer still has a long way to go, but thanks to two important aspects of his life being taken care of: nutrition and education, he is a child with hope.

Psychosocial support often becomes the most important service that a programme can provide in cases where children are left not just orphaned but scarred by the resulting exploitation. For these children emotional sustenance often becomes more important than food for the body.

In December 2007, Iqbal a HIV positive truck driver who is a WAG CHELSEA beneficiary, brought in a boy of around eleven. He was painfully thin, scruffy and suffering from dermatitis. His skin was a mass of oozing boils and blisters. He was anaemic, had serious breathing trouble and to add to his woes, his body had become resistant to a large number of antibiotics. His name, he said was Rajan.

Iqbal on a visit to his village in Uttar Pradesh, had chanced upon the boy at a PHC. The doctor there told Iqbal that the boy was positive and that his parents had died of the same infection. The child was an orphan, unsupervised and beyond help. The centre requested Iqbal to take the child to Delhi.

Being a PLHIV himself, Iqbal saw merit in the suggestion and brought Rajan to WAG CHELSEA.

At the care centre, Iqbal's beaten little body gathered strength thanks to food, rest and medical care. But as he grew stronger the boy also grew extremely restless and moody. It left most the staff perplexed till they carefully coaxed the reason out of him.

Rajan had a brother Vikram, who was two years younger. The children had been five and three respectively when their parents died of HIV. After their parents' death their uncle threw them out of the house assuming both were positive and capable of spreading the disease.

A kindly paper vendor took them in and let them live in the newspaper office and looked after them. He even sent them to the local school. In fact it was this man who got the boys tested; Rajan turned out to be positive while Vikram tested negative.

Despite knowing Rajan's status the man did not put the boy on the streets, he was sent to the PHC regularly for treatment. Vikram was sent off to work for a fruit juice vendor, at the age of five.

Life for these two boys continued on an even keel for a while. Each looked after himself and met the other occasionally; they had no one but each other to call family. However a young PLHIV despite a kindly vendor needs special care to fight the disease. Rajan's health deteriorated to the point where the PHC requested Iqbal to bring him to Delhi. The boy had been so ill that he had been unable to meet either the newspaper vendor or his brother before leaving.

The thought of his brother alone and unsupervised, played havoc with Rajan's mind and began to cost him his wellbeing. Soon it became apparent to the staff that the only way to help this child was to actually find his brother.

A counsellor was despatched with Rajan to the juice vendor's stall in the boy's hometown. There was no Vikram to be seen. The owner alleged that the boy had stolen money and run off. This upset Rajan no end and he heatedly defended his brother; the owner turned abusive and asked both of them to get out of the town as soon as possible.

A distraught Rajan refused to meet either his paternal uncle or his caregiver the paper vendor. The duo returned to Delhi and it was a downslide again for the young PLHIV.

The CHELSEA staff was at their wits end about what to do. Then one day they had their answer: it was Iqbal. He had come to Delhi to collect his ART medication and had dropped by at the centre. The staff asked him if he would be willing to help out with Rajan's case. Would Iqbal be willing to take a few days off and help Rajan search for his brother.

As luck would have it Iqbal had a few days off and agreed to accompany Rajan in the search for his brother. To cut a long story short, the same fruit juice vendor was visited; this time, thanks to Iqbal's imposing presence, the man was less arrogant and suggested that they try the paternal uncle's house.

Vikram, innocent of the crime, had indeed gone to the paternal uncle's house to seek help. But the man had turned him out refusing to either believe or help him.

“ Go look for him in the cattle shed, where else would a scum like him go?.”

The little boy was indeed found living with the cattle.

Iqbal brought both the children back to WAG CHELSEA. The pair stays at the CCC – one affected and the other infected and both with deep psychological scars.

What lies ahead is best left for time to tell.

As for now, they have something without which even time would find wounds difficult to heal: the unconditional love for of one brother for another.

The SAMARTH programme emphasises on education as an important service in the basket that it offers the OVCs. That it is important is not up for debate, but to what degree it can make a difference to a child's life is always a pleasure to see.

Maya, a chirpy and bright 13 year old enrolled herself as a PE for one of CHELSEA's outreach programme. She was the perfect candidate, intelligent, articulate and popular with students and teachers alike.

She did such a good job that, WAG CHELSEA had a whole list of children wanting to become PEs.

But soon unhappy times befell the little girl. Her mother a widow for some years started falling ill frequently. The little girl gave up school to look after her since here older siblings were all either married or working. Despite care and treatment when her mother did not take a turn for the better, the doctors advised a HIV test. The results confirmed her worst fears: Maya's mother was HIV+.

Maya got her mother to the CHELSEA CCC. She was counselled and so was Maya. The young girl resumed her education via the Open School, a distant learning system, run by the Government of India. She did extremely well. Her books being the pep pill which kept her going. As expected, she finished high school with excellent marks.

Soon her elder brother too was diagnosed as HIV+. The boy unable to cope with his status became abusive with his family; through the trying times, Maya kept at her studies.

She became an inspiration for several young children like her thanks to a film about her made by a Delhi Doordarshan producer. The film won the Global Viewer's Award at a competition held by the Asia Pacific Institute of Broadcasting Development.

Maya accompanied the film crew as they travelled across cities spreading the word about HIV. Meeting people and speaking to them about the situation that most vulnerable children like her find themselves in, has been a cathartic experience for her.

Today she is still with WAG CHELSEA, studying in an open university and determined to do something concrete with her life. It is a long journey yet and she has many miles to go before she can rest awhile.

For now she is happy doing what she believes in: educating underprivileged children in the tiny school that is run by WAG. As she helps the little ones wade through a maze of letters and numbers her face bears the wistful look as she perhaps wonders how things could have been different for these tiny children.

But it passes as most things pass and a look of determination comes through. She knows that the only way these children will be able to go through life will be on the strength of that great equaliser: education.

As she repeats the alphabets for the young, her voice dances out of the room, jumps happily over the school gate, flees from the congested alleyways and escapes into the vast open space that people call the sky.

Knowledge as they say shall set you free.