

Approved by Soulla Yiasouma

Aiming High for Young People case studies – YOF/YCF project (West Midlands)

Crossing the Cultural Divide

Young people in Birmingham from different ethnic backgrounds came together in pursuit of a common goal when they visited a home for street children in the Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu in India.

The idea for the visit came about as a result of the young peoples' desire to learn about other cultures and to complete the skills section of the Duke of Edinburgh Award. The Broadway Youth Centre in Aston teamed up with the Perry Barr Detached Project, which covers the wards of Oscott and Kingstanding. All three areas experience high levels of deprivation. A group of 13 young people came together from the two projects, made up of young men and women of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian origin, as well as dual heritage and white British ethnicity.

The group applied to the Youth Opportunities Fund, which provides money to support projects and initiatives proposed by young people. Applications are judged by local panels of young people and the idea is to support projects that encourage greater community cohesion and improved opportunities for young people in disadvantaged communities. The Exchange Group was successful in its bid for £5,000 and planning for the trip began in early 2007.

Regular weekly meetings were held so that the group could explore each other's culture, religion and background. The idea was to improve understanding, promote teamwork and encourage friendships between young people who might not normally mix and there were frank discussions about issues such as arranged marriages and religion.

By the time the group travelled to India in August 2007, a strong bond of friendship had been formed and this provided a solid foundation for the physical and cultural

challenges of visiting an impoverished area of India. The young people carried out a huge range of tasks at the Florence Home Foundation, which provides a supportive environment for local street children. The Exchange Group took part in teaching the children songs and games, working on the farm, planting trees, fundraising and helping with organisation.

The impact of the visit on the group was huge. One of them said: "I achieved a lot. I don't know where to start, but I felt satisfaction that I may have helped a little. I felt rewarded but I would love to do more." Another said: "Self-confidence and self-believe, plus a lot more but it's hard to put down."

Many of the young people commented on the sense of satisfaction and pride they felt in taking part of the project and said it was a "humbling experience." One summed this feeling up by saying: "I have everything I could ever want and need. They have nothing at all but are still happy, always smiling." Even the most mundane of tasks elicited a positive response, as this young person's comments shows: "I actually enjoyed putting the compost mix in bags as it was a team effort and we talked a lot, not moaning."

A return trip by some of the children from the Florence Home Foundation to Birmingham took place in February 2008 and the exchange was judged to be such a success that another is planned, this time by young people at the 610 youth centre in Kingstanding and a group of young people in the Lozells area of Birmingham. The young people from the original exchange group continue to meet regularly for social events and fundraising and they are providing support and guidance to this year's group in organising their trip.

-ends-