

Noah's Mark

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by Barbara A. Hall, Photograph by Millicent Harvey



One boy died, but another lived. Both impel Noah Levinson '00 as he pursues his dream of bringing health care to children in the slums of Calcutta.

The first boy was named Sudip, and Levinson met him the first time he went to India at the end of his postgraduate year at NMH. His dormmate, Sohrab Noshirvani '00, an Iranian Muslim, had talked of spending time in India working at Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying Destitutes. Levinson, an American Jew, was convinced he wanted to go there too. "I was impressed by the grace Sohrab seemed to experience in sharing with someone the journey from life into death," explains Levinson.

But he wasn't prepared for what he saw when he and Noshirvani arrived in India. "I saw a reality which I'd only seen in those most horrific scenes in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. These individuals lying on rough-hewn cots were skeletons blanketed in a thin layer of flesh."

Still, he did what he and other volunteers had come to do: wash, feed, massage, sing, and pray with these people. "We spent a lot of time touching people who were 'untouchables' in their own society," he says. He also spent time at a dispensary, cleaning and bandaging cuts and wounds for street children who showed up once a week for food and medicine. One of the teenagers was Sudip, who had a puncture wound in his head from a rusty nail. Unfortunately, Levinson ran out of medicine before Sudip could be treated.

That could have been the end of the story. Levinson returned to the United States and completed his freshman year at Marlboro College in Vermont. The countryside of New England was a stark contrast to the hot, crowded inner cities of India, but Levinson was hooked by what he calls the "magic" of India and returned the next summer to Mother Teresa's hospice.

Sadly, Sudip also returned to the hospice, where Levinson found him near death from an infection caused by the wound that there had been no medicine for. In a city of more than 12 million people, it was extraordinary that these two young men should meet up again this way. When Sudip died in Levinson's arms, he felt personally responsible. "I hadn't done enough," he says. "This was a message from God telling me I had to do more."

For Levinson the most frustrating thing about Sudip's death, and many others, was that it was preventable. Thus he formed a plan. With classmate Noshirvani, he'd start a mobile health clinic to bring basic medical care to children who lived in the streets. Walking to and from the hospice, says Levinson, "I'd befriended a number of these children and would stop to play cards with them, share a meal, or have them teach me Bengali slang. These kids became the 'more' that I needed to do."

Two summers of experience at Mother Teresa's hospice taught Levinson and Noshirvani that they needed an existing parent organization to support this work; otherwise it would take years to get started. They found one in Howrah, Calcutta's sister city across the Ganges River.

The organization, Ashalayam Don Bosco, was founded by Father Anthony, an Indian priest and teacher who dedicated his life to helping street children. With an orphanage and training center, Ashalayam had recently opened an informal school. But the children were so weak and malnourished they had trouble attending school. If one got sick, they all got sick. A mobile health clinic was sorely needed—and thus a collaboration was born.

Levinson returned to the States to fundraise. "I find it amazing that people prescribe to my madness," he says gratefully. In short order he had \$30,000 and a return ticket to India. Noshirvani went off to Colby College while Levinson spent eight months setting up the project. The funds purchased a van outfitted as an ambulance, a doctor's services, a nurse, a coordinator, and a driver—and the project was ready to go.

"I'm struck again and again by the interfaith dimension of this activity," says Levinson. "The project was initiated by an Iranian Muslim and an American Jew; the parent organization in India was founded by a Christian; and most of the children receiving medical care are Hindu." However, Levinson is wise enough to know that the project will succeed in the long run only if it is staffed by very capable local people and remains part of an Indian-based program.

Levinson is committed to being in Calcutta twice a year for the next five years to oversee the project. He worked with the director of the informal school and numerous doctors and social workers to get started. "To our delight, we were met with open arms, thanks, and a willingness to help," he says.

There are about 700 children in the 12 schools set up by Ashalayam. Through Levinson's mobile health clinic, the children receive basic daily nutrition—a boiled egg, a banana, and a biscuit—to boost their immune systems. That has led to increased attendance at school. They get monthly checkups, free medicine, and free hospitalization, surgery, and rehabilitation. About 400 additional children not in the school also receive care. In tribute to Sudip, no child is turned away—ever.

In July, Levinson began a six-month stay in India. This time it's for credit toward his world studies degree at Marlboro College, where he's a junior. The college community has been greatly supportive of his project, he says. In April several members of the community, including Levinson himself, had their heads shaved when their fundraising goal of \$2,500 was met and exceeded in the "Hair to Help" campaign.

His recent interest in India isn't Levinson's first international experience. His father, who teaches nutrition at Tufts University, worked in famine relief in India and Bangladesh in the 1970s and encouraged his children to participate in service projects around the world.

Levinson traveled to Ghana, Mexico, and Thailand during his high school years. He remains close to the family in Ghana where he stayed for a summer.

But he also cites NMH as a leading reason for his work. He came here after an undistinguished high school career in Cambridge, Massachusetts, highlighted by his attendance at nine proms. That wasn't enough to get him into college so he chose an additional year at NMH, which his sister, Mira Levinson '88, had attended, for its arts and music and academic rigor.

He acknowledges English teacher Nick Fleck for teaching him to write and love to learn, and is grateful to another English teacher, Bill Batty '59, for making him realize "what an incredible medium film is." He credits Chaplain Betty Stookey for "her greatest teaching—that we all believe in the same God." His project, he says, "is a continuation of my NMH learning."

With this compelling project half a world away, does he have time for a life of his own? Levinson says he comes back to the hills of southern Vermont for refreshment. "It feeds me," he says, "I like extremes and this is far from the heat, noises, colors, and smells of India." He claims that he has time for dating, and his eyes light up as he talks about restoring a relative's old BMW and recently test driving a brand-new one, even though this day he's driving a dusty Subaru.

As to what keeps him going, Levinson explains, "I hate the fundraising, but I love the project. The recognition I get motivates me, but I get more satisfaction when I see a sick child get better. I was given a message through Sudip. I listened to the message and have been blessed with the opportunity to add meaning to my own life through the life of Sudip."

Is he a hero? Levinson spurns the thought. But he has heroes: Ghandi and Mother Teresa top the list. And there's one more: that other boy, the one who lived. His name is Irshad and, like Sudip, he is an ongoing inspiration to Levinson.

Irshad, a child laborer, lived with his parents and 11 siblings in the slum of Pilkhana. One day he spent his hard-earned rupees to rent a bicycle. His inexperience in riding caused an accident and he fell into a deep, open frying pan of hot oil. Burned over 60 percent of his body, he spent three days virtually neglected in a government hospital before his family took him home to die. Word got to Levinson of Irshad's plight. He ran to the boy's home, then, with Irshad's father, carried the boy in a make-shift stretcher through the streets to a private hospital and a doctor he knew would help. Irshad spent three months in the hospital and returned home scarred but strong.

When Levinson left India in December 2002, Irshad gave him a gift only he could give. He borrowed a tape player and, to the music of his favorite song, danced nonstop for ten minutes, sweat and blood seeping from his wounds. It was, Levinson says, "the most beautiful thing I had ever seen."

By the time Levinson returns to India this time, Irshad will be attending elementary school so

he can be a doctor, like the one who saved his life.

Levinson's mobile health clinic gives medical care to one tenth of one percent of the total population of street children in Calcutta and Howrah. "If we look at street kids in the world, the impact of this project is invisible," Levinson admits. "If we look at street kids in India, the impact of this project is less than a dent. If, however, we look at the street children in Ichapur, a slum in which we work, the impact of this project is considerable."

Or we could look at Irshad dancing.