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Saving lives in the slum Marlboro native marks a decade of Calcutta Kids

By MIKE FAHER
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BRATTLEBORO - In 2002, Marlboro College student Noah Levinson traveled to India "with a single suitcase, a little spending money and \$30,000 to start a program to help save the lives of children and to improve their well-being."



Noah Levinson, a Marlboro native and founder of Calcutta Kids, on a flooded street in an Indian slum.

A decade later, he is returning to Vermont to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Calcutta Kids, a nonprofit that has reduced malnutrition and infant- and maternal-mortality rates among residents of one Indian slum.

The organization's U.S. base is in Marlboro, where Levinson's father, Jim, serves as vice president of the Calcutta Kids board. He also has another title - proud father.

"Noah is often moved to tears by what he sees in these slums, but he also genuinely loves the country," Jim Levinson said. "I envy the work that he does, which is so grassroots, so on the-ground and so hands-on."

Noah Levinson, 31, is due back in the area this week. Along with his wife, Evangeline, he will lead a Calcutta Kids celebration scheduled for 5:30 to 8 p.m. Friday at Centre Congregational Church parlor, 193 Main St. in Brattleboro.

Noah Levinson will lead a Moment for Peace at the church between 5:30 and 6 p.m. The event, which coincides with this month's Gallery Walk, is sponsored by Brattleboro Area Interfaith Initiative and Brattleboro Area Interfaith Clergy Association.

"It's a celebration and a benefit," Jim Levinson said.

The benefit side of the gathering is important given that most funding for Calcutta Kids comes from individuals in the U.S. Levinson said his son's organization has a track record that encourages such giving. "People contribute knowing that their money is getting good results," he said.

The group's website - www.calcuttakids.org - features testimonials supporting that assertion. Among them is a note attributed to Anna Herforth, a nutrition consultant to the World Bank who wrote that "Calcutta Kids is the most impressive organization I know to reduce malnutrition where it's really needed.

"Another thing I like about Calcutta Kids is not just the documented results that bear out their impact but that the intangible element of reaching people in a respectful, empowering, genuine way is guaranteed," Herforth wrote. "No holy angels flying down to touch the unclean."

From the start, Noah Levinson has taken that hands-on approach that his father now lauds. The younger Levinson's journey began in 2000 with a post-high school trip with a friend, an Iranian Muslim named Sohrab Noshirvani, to work at Mother Teresa's Home for Dying Destitutes in Calcutta.

"I was exposed to a reality I had never before imagined," Levinson recalled during a 2002 talk in Brattleboro.

He added that, when he returned to Vermont, "My body was here but my heart and my soul were still in India. I had found the place in which I could be closest to God. And knowing that such a place existed but not being there was painful."

So Levinson spent another summer in Calcutta and came to the realization that, for him, comforting the dying was not enough. He returned to the U.S. and began raising money for a mobile health clinic to serve Calcutta's street children.

"Understandably, my idea was met with a considerable amount of skepticism - even some cynicism," Levinson said in 2002. "While

admitting that such concerns might very well be legitimate, the spiritual pull was strong enough to allow me to move ahead in spite of them."

Within two months, he had raised more than \$30,000. In January 2002, Levinson left college and went to India to start the clinic.

Such determination and demonstrable results have marked the progress of Calcutta Kids ever since. The organization attained formal non-profit status in 2005, the same year Noah Levinson moved to Calcutta full time.

Relying mostly on Indian staffing, Calcutta Kids' offerings now include a Maternal and Young Child Health Initiative "to improve health knowledge and increase access to health care for pregnant women and young children."

The program is aimed at reducing morbidity and mortality for children and mothers, improving birth weights and ensuring that children up to 3 years old grow normally.

From August 2011 to January 2012, the initiative reached 476 mother-child pairs and 56 pregnant women, according to data reported by Calcutta Kids.

During the same time period, 387 children were weighed as part of a Growth Monitoring and Promotion program.

Also, there were 851 checkups and medicine distributions for children under age 3 and 515 such encounters with pregnant women and mothers of young children.

And hundreds of children were treated at the Calcutta Kids Diarrhea Treatment Center, which is set up to treat the effects of diarrhea (mainly dehydration) while also counseling prevention.

Jim Levinson said the programs have shown results; for example, the malnutrition rate is far below the national average in the slum served by Calcutta Kids, and birth weights have risen.

"They are very evidenced based in everything that they do," Levinson said. "They are willing to try new ideas, but they follow the progress of those programs very carefully and systematically."

For instance, a micro-health insurance program that had been offered by Calcutta Kids ended last year.

"They found that the people who really needed it the most were not using it," Levinson said. "They made a decision to phase out that program. It just wasn't working."

Such evaluations are ongoing. But Levinson says a decade full of success stories shows that Calcutta Kids is a success.

"There are so many kids whose lives have been saved by this program," he said.

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