

## **“College student brings medical service to Calcutta slums”**

By David Gram, Associated Press Writer | May 21, 2005

MARLBORO, Vt. --Noah Levinson had spent summers during high school traveling to Mexico, Thailand and Ghana. But it wasn't until he went to India that he started on his current path.

He became a volunteer at Mother Theresa's Home for Dying Destitutes in Calcutta. He remembers heat unlike any he'd ever felt growing up in New England, and sweat pouring off his body.

But none of that bothered him.

"The holiness of the place just sort of rules over everything else."

His task was to give some love and affection -- a hand to hold -- to street people exiting a life that in most cases hadn't given them sufficient food, never mind those sweeter pleasures.

"To this day I've never felt it was so important for me to be anywhere." The people he met were often emaciated, "badly broken, malnourished," Levinson said. "They were being treated like people for the first time in their lives."

He returned to the United States that September and enrolled as a freshman at Marlboro College, a very difficult adjustment in that his task was "to sit on a hill and discuss and intellectualize and debate about things that seem not nearly as important as being with people when they're dying."

Back at Mother Theresa's the next summer, Levinson found out that one of the terminally ill people he would be caring for was a boy named Sudip. He had first met Sudip the previous summer. Sudip had cut his head on a rusty nail and needed antibiotics, perhaps a tetanus shot. No such medicines were available and a year later, he was dying.

"I took his death as a sign from God that I needed to do more" than care for the dying, Levinson said.

Since then, a young man who is still just 24 and just graduating from Marlboro this spring, has established an international charitable organization that has a mobile medical unit -- a van that travels the streets in and around Calcutta and provides free medical care to young street people.

Calcutta Kids has a staff of eight -- all Indian. It has received organizational support from a Roman Catholic charitable group called the Salesian Missions. It received an initial financial boost when Levinson's late paternal grandfather, a Pittsburgh steel executive and philanthropist, sent a letter to 30 of his friends asking them to support his grandson's project.

"I don't know if they were just humoring me or if they had faith in me," Levinson said. "I just felt I owed it to Sudip. I had to try."

That an observant Jew would receive a sign from God while working in a Catholic charity may seem unusual. But it is in keeping with Levinson's background. Levinson said "it's a cliché among people my age," but he thinks of himself less as religious than spiritual.

He was steeped all through childhood in his parents' faith-based efforts to bring about a better world. Levinson spent his early childhood living in the Boston homeless shelter where his parents worked. The family later moved to a farm in Winchendon, Mass., where they grew food for the shelter.

The family splits its time between their home near the entrance to Marlboro College and Cambridge, Mass. Levinson's father is spiritual leader of the synagogue in Brattleboro, about 10 miles down the hill from the college. His mother, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, is a counselor and teacher of Enneagram, a personality typing system based on Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam.

Levinson said he felt "very much in the presence of God" while working at Mother Theresa's. He said he also feels in the presence of God when listening to his father deliver a sermon at the synagogue, when he attends Sunday Mass at the Catholic St. Paul's Cathedral in Cambridge, and when he is in the company of devout Muslims and Hindus.

Levinson said he has received a lot of help and advice from a range of people with wide experience helping the poor both in the United States and internationally, for which he is very grateful.

The help from the Salesian Mission, which provided the organizational backbone to Calcutta Kids as it was just starting out, may soon be scaled back, as Levinson seeks to make his organization stand more on its own.

The mission's help was practical. Levinson said he at first worked as a conduit for the funds he raised to go to the Salesians, who did the groundwork to put the mobile medical service on the road.

Levinson laughed as he told how some of his Jewish contributors were taken aback when they got thank-you notes from the mission saying "Thank you very much in the name of Jesus Christ."

He said he planned to go to Calcutta in June, where he would take on the difficult task of breaking off from the Salesians and making Calcutta Kids completely freestanding.

Levinson, who said his hobbies include playing the viola, reading and discussing politics and religion with family and friends, said he hopes to apply next year to a new school of public health begun in Bangladesh. The program is a joint effort of Harvard and Columbia schools of public health, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and a major non-governmental organization in that country.

He said among the attractions of the Bangladesh program is that "it's only a half-hour plane ride from Calcutta," and it will enable him to continue polishing language skills he has begun to pick up in Calcutta. "I'll get to keep working on my Bengali," he said.

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