

Nusrat Ahmed  
"Street Youth Summer Program in the Arts" w/ Restless Beings  
1995 Summer Service Fund

### **"Street Stories"**

Dear Class of 1995,

"It is both a blessing and a curse to feel everything so deeply." There are no better words to describe myself than these ones. It perfectly encapsulates how burdensome yet beautiful being able to feel everything, feel suffering, and feel happiness, truly is.

As an active proponent of poetry, photography, and storytelling as ways to raise awareness of issues that plague the oppressed, I hoped to help underprivileged children in my travels through artistic expression and community service. My project provided street children and orphans a safe space to share their stories, uncover their talents, and be heard. I wanted to provide street children and orphans a platform for self-expression and rediscovery. The art, which will come in many forms such as painting and poetry, will tell their story.

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My dad grew up in Karachi, Pakistan as a street kid. He had a mother and father but had to fend for himself. This was the situation for him, his five brothers, and his sister. He would fool around with his friends, save up a few cents to buy some candy, which he would suck on from sunrise to sunset. "We took care of each other," he would say.

Over the summer, I visited the Restless Beings Rehab Centre and it felt like a glimpse into my father's childhood. These kids are drug abusers, prostitutes, and ill. Many of them didn't have mothers or fathers and those that did, ran away from them due to abuse and neglect. There was one 10-year-old girl, Laki, who was pregnant. And yet still worked at the Brothel in this condition.

I wasn't exactly sure how to approach them at first because I didn't want it to appear that I was going to 'save' them. I didn't want to make it seem that I had come with an understanding of the hardships they had gone through, because I didn't. I didn't know where they slept or what they ate for breakfast. I didn't know what they did for fun. But my first encounter with them immediately vanished any doubts and confusion, as I just became myself. I spoke to them as Nusrat, just a Bengali girl, with hopes to better the world and myself.

I fell in love quickly with a boy named Shahid. He was such a handsome and friendly boy. I sat next to him and he offered me his rice and talked to me with my hands in his hands. He was from Sylhet and so is my mother, so we joked around that he was a "Sylheti fua (boy)" and I was a "Sylheti furi (girl)." I asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up and he said a child doctor.

Next to him was a boy named Mohammad. I asked him what he wanted most in this world. Mohammed asked, "If I ask for something, will you be able to get it?" I laughed and said that I would try. He told me he wanted his mom. I told him I

wouldn't be able to get his mom for him and asked him to settle for me as a sister. He smiled and said yes.

There were so many more I met. The kids taught me a handshake and I taught them rock, paper, scissors. I sincerely loved each one of them and felt like we had become quick friends. As I piled back into my car, they pressed their faces to the window, kissed me, and asked me to come back.

The next week, during my second field visit, I brought with me drawing pads, oil pastels, and paints for each of the children. There were a lot of arts and crafts. I think art is one of the most powerful forms of self-expression and rediscovery. Whether it's painting or coloring, the colors that are chosen, the designs that are made, and the lines that are formed, they all tell a story.

The children all sat next to each other but it was quickly apparent that there was a rift between two of the women.

I tried to pacify them but behind me another quarrel was at its peak. A boy and an elderly woman had begun arguing over the art sets. I had asked everyone to keep the art sets and bring it with them the next time they came. In fact, I made all of them promise me they would. But the women had scoffed and accused one of the boys that the minute I would leave, he would go and sell it for money. The boy stood up, fuming with anger, and defended himself. The woman picked up her things and walked away and the boy sat down quietly.

If there was anything I learned from that argument is that it isn't easy to grasp the attention of street children. Most of them are wild; accustomed to the free lifestyle they are in. If you shelter them, some of them seek to escape. I realized that to get them to express themselves in their art I needed to make them fall in love with not only the art, but also themselves in the context of their surroundings. And so I asked them to first paint with their eyes closed, and so many of them were insecure.

They didn't even attempt to color in fear of drawing badly. And so I held onto a woman's shaking hands and outlined a small flower. I really felt that at that moment I was able to connect with her personally.

Some of the children were able to draw amazingly. They drew flags, flowers, and their names. I think they enjoyed painting the most, as many of them had never used a brush to paint before.

One of the boys, Muqtasim, had quickly become my favorite. The minute he saw me he asked me "Why do you smile so much?" Considering that his own smile never left his face, I was able to ask him the same question. Muqtasim really enjoyed painting and followed my directions. Afterwards, I gave out chocolate filled bags to each of the children.

The following week, we organized a small photo-shoot for the kids. I took their pictures and listened to their stories. I then printed each photo at a professional studio, laminated them, and gave them out. They each went around and shared their dreams for the future. We then had a small talent show where one of the boys sang an original song dedicated to his girlfriend.

As Eid came closer, my mom and I travelled to different shops to buy new clothes. "Isn't it sad? How all these people can't even expect to see a change when

they really need it? Like, whatever situation they are in now, it's like they're in it forever," I said to my mom as we were riding in a rickshaw.

"We don't go to sleep with big dreams for literally a different tomorrow either," she scoffed at my naivety.

"Yes, but at least you have the hope that one day things will probably change, since you're working towards it, for it to actually happen in the future. These kids, these kids, don't even have education. Every day is the same to them," I argued back. And she fell silent.

Eid has never been just another day for me. It's the day I wake up to the smell of my mom's sugary sweets and warm chicken. It's the day I wear my best clothes. The ones I make my dad iron the night before. The ones I hang in my closet separate from all my other clothes. It's the day of happiness and the day of family.

This Eid, however, was the first Eid I spent in Bangladesh. And I woke up differently. The new dress in my closet didn't receive the attention it should have and the food on the table was not finished as it usually does. All that was on my mind were the street kids who were about to receive new Eid clothes. I wondered if the girls were running around, brushes and bands in hand, zipping up each other's dresses. If the boys were ironing their shirts with their hands, with tupi's on the middle of their head or tilted to the side.

I partnered with Restless Beings to give Eid presents to over 400 street kids. Even though there was a lot of ruckus and noise, the gifts were successfully given out. They were given clothes, fruit, sandals, towels, book bags, etc. Handing out gifts to the children was one of the greatest experiences in my life because it was nice to know that they would be wearing the things I got them. Their bloody and dirty feet, feet that have walked in and out of many situations, would now have protection from the harshness of the ground. And even if I couldn't physically be with them all my life, knowing that they were wearing shoes, helped bridge the separation.

I have undoubtedly had one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. These children have taught me the real meaning of friendship, hardship, and happiness. With the little they have, they make the most of it. And they share. They smile. They jump into puddles of water when it rains because they can. But they deserve a better tomorrow. They deserve a tomorrow that begins with a different sun. While giving out Eid gifts made an impact on their life, I would love to one day provide for them that is more long term i.e. help in the form of sponsoring education for them.

I hope one day I can. So they can see their full potential. So they can see the talent I see in them every single time I met with them. I wish I could have bottled up Shahid's laughter or Muqtasim's smile and wear it round my neck. But while I cannot, their memories, their stories, and their struggle will always remain a part of me.

And now to the class of 1995, thank you for funding my project. Words can't describe how thankful I am to your service fund. This project brought smiles to these children's faces. They appreciated their artistic differences and learned new things about themselves. Thank you to the class of 1995 for allowing me to help them rediscover themselves.





