

ANUBHAV DHAR, NSF YOUTH AMBASSADOR

Initially, when I was provided the opportunity to conduct a Spelling Bee workshop for underprivileged students in India, I could not fathom the magnitude of the experiences I would soon be facing. I could have never imagined that I could get so much satisfaction from helping these children; in retrospect, I now remember the program as one of the most gratifying and rewarding experiences of my life. Teaching, meeting, and befriending these children has undoubtedly reshaped my perceptions of many ideas. I have never met students with as much appreciation towards any academic program as I did with these, and to contribute to their education and knowledge leaves me with great delight.

Invariably, every time I visit the country with my family, the trip serves not only as a means for us to reunite and relish with our extended family and relatives, but also as a reality check, specifically for me. During my time there, I continually contrast India with America through various aspects of life, ranging from family bonds to standard of life. Through this mental rubric, I began to see in vivid detail what little resources many of the children have. Against this macabre canvas of lack of encouragement, impoverished conditions, and deprived opportunities, the incredible students I worked with painted pictures of dedication despite deficit, optimism in the face of overwhelming hurdles, and true tenacity.

The planning process for this Spelling Bee was perhaps the most time and effort consuming of all the procedures that led to the program's success. Before arriving in India, I began to thoroughly read through the workshop material, and soon drafted overall lesson plans. This was to ensure that I could confidently and intelligently communicate to schools as to why I should conduct the Spelling Bee workshop at their school.



Once we arrived in Andhra Pradesh, India, I started to reach out to local schools and met with principals. For many of the government schools that were controlled by a higher authority, it was required of me to personally write a letter to the Central Board to receive their authoritative sanction. Our original intention was to target a school that wasn't as well off, specifically JNV schools. However, due to a national holiday due to the 12-day auspicious event called 'Pushkaram,' these government schools were

not available and we were unable to contact them. Then, after two weeks' worth of futile attempts, Saint Francis de Sales (SFS) school called back to arrange a meeting with their principal. At last, a school had given the chance for me to pitch the program. After discussing all the logistics involved in the process, ranging from teacher help and media sanctions, I was given the green light for the program.

With a sigh of relief, we had a large banner printed, titled "Spelling Bee Workshop 2015" officially marking the beginning of the workshop.



The following day, I was escorted to the classroom that I would be teaching in; right from the very beginning, I was greeted almost overwhelmingly, with claps and cheers, and with grins and glee. As I set down the material and introduced myself, I could sense and see that every student in the class was attuned and deeply motivated to learn from this program. Furthermore, I could feel the great deal of respect the students had for me, and this fueled my drive to conduct the program in the best way possible.

Throughout the program, I made the classroom very interactive with questions, games, and mock bees, and this was well received by the students, as their regular day to day courses never involved as much interface and discussion. Since I had projected myself to the entire class, every student flattered me at the end of the workshop, leaping to shake my hand, introducing themselves with boundless joy, and thankful for the program that I was lucky enough to teach.



Aside from their zeal, I was shocked and amazed by two memorable events during my workshop. From the beginning itself, I was not called by my first name, or even a respectable *American* title, Mr.

Instead, students called to me as "Sir" and "Master," two titles which have never before been used to refer to me. In fact, the first time I heard it, I instantly looked behind me, assuming that they were referring to another teacher. I looked back at the class, and to my surprise, all the students were cheerfully looking at me – as stated before, the amount of respect these students gave to me took me aback and I will always remember that first moment I entered the class.

On the day of the test, a quiet student in the back of the classroom did one of the most grateful things I have ever seen anyone do, much less someone of their age. She asked permission from her teacher to come to the front of the classroom, looked at me, and showed her gratitude in a memorized speech, which she presented to the entire class. When she finished, she looked towards me again and said “thank you sir,” smiled, and sat down. Once again, I was stunned - she voiced her appreciation to me in a way that I had never expected – something that I will never forget.

After the test, we graded the 48 students’ tests with speed and caution, and selected the three winners. The certificates were printed on professional material from a nearby printing press, for all participants and winners. For the top three students, we bought special prizes, including dictionaries, word games, and chocolates.

Simultaneously during these few days, we gathered all the media personnel our family could, including reporters, photographers, and videographers. Each reporter visited our house at different times, so we carefully deliberated what was to be written in the newspapers to each. Following this process for each of the 8 newspapers (Times of India, The Hindu, Hans India, Deccan Chronicle, Andhra Jyothi, Sakshi, Eenadu, Indian Express), we wrote multiple reporter’s notices and letters for approval of papers for the newspaper contacts. Finally and after great effort, we received approvals from all the papers and corresponding reporters. The program was now almost over and in all my tension about the students and the media, I had forgotten to reflect upon my few days with the students. I immediately sat down, and began to write about my plethora of experiences through those days with the school and with the students, absorbing and cherishing all of them.

The next day was the summit of the program, the awards ceremony. My family and I arrived quite early, before the school had begun their daily morning assembly and prayers. We set the banner, ensured the mic was working fine, and grouped the media personnel in different areas. Soon, the rituals had begun, and once the principal had made his announcement, he handed off the mic to me. I took the stage and looked at the crowd of students in front of me, smiling and quieted for me to speak. I scanned the common area for the section that I taught to, and found them in the back, anxious for the results of the test but also grateful for their opportunity. I briefly spoke about the program that I had conducted, which everyone had now become aware of, and about NSF and its scholarships. I explained how committed the organization was to not only promote academic excellence in





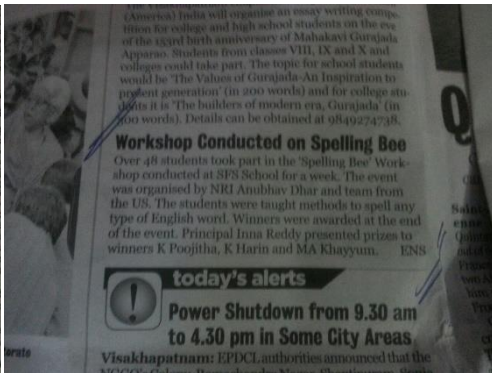
the US, but to provide encouragement and all the support it can to struggling students in India going to college.

After my quick summary and speech, I announced the winners of the Spelling Bee Workshop 2015, one by one. The media moved closer and began to take videos and photos of each student and my family also gathered on

the stage, all in front of the banner. All students were recognized as promised, each receiving certificates, and the winners were rewarded with extra gifts. In addition, we gifted the principal of SFS School a 'Certificate of Hosting' and he reciprocated with a 'Certificate of Conducting.' Handing the certificates and prizes to the students and watching their faces light up in joy was one of the most rewarding sights and feelings I have ever experienced in my life.



The following day, the workshop and awards ceremony had made it into the papers, in both English and Telugu languages.



Overall, being provided this opportunity to spend time with students like those in a place like that was a true blessing. I have made many memories that will last a lifetime at SFS School, whether it was personally speaking to students or rewarding them with prizes, all thanks to NSF and more specifically, Mr. Gade. All in all, this workshop has been a humbling experience, has nurtured my viewpoints on various issues, and has granted me the chance to teach a group of motivated, truly gracious students that many students elsewhere take for granted. I wholeheartedly express my gratitude to the NSF organization, Mr. Gade, and am very thankful to be a part of this amazing and influential community.