

rolling paint

“Tiger, tiger!” “Parrot, peacock...” Raggle-taggle boys with grubby faces, worn clothes and robust spirits gathered around Alexis and Roopi on a dusty carpet, amid a sea of crayons and stencils and papers. The theme of our slightly chaotic, or rather creative, workshop: “What exactly would you like to paint on the walls of your room?”

The “room” is a small space above the GRP (General Reserve Police) centre at the New Delhi Railway Station. It is the longest running Salaam Balak Trust contact point in the city, to which the children who live on the platform may come for medical treatment, lessons, a nutritious lunch, support and counselling and play. The contact point is something unique in their lives: a safe place run by sympathetic adults.

GUEST COLUMN

Charlotte Dugdale

I first visited some years ago, but spent many hours there in the hot months of 2009. The children and the staff who work with them shared their stories and I wanted to thank them for this, with something that would “catch their imaginations”. My idea was simple: I knew construction people and I knew artists. If I could get them together with the children, we could give the place a facelift. Happily, Chawla Techno Construct and Delhi based artist Alexis Halliwell climbed on board.

So there we were with the children, exploring ideas, watching a jungle theme and a group of favoured animals -tiger, monkey, elephant, peacock, parrot - emerge from our drawings on paper. But before we could start on the walls, they had to be created. Flaking plaster, bare brick,

patches of damp, open gaps with rusty mesh tacked across them, meant a great deal of structural work was required. Chawla Techno Construct did it quickly and efficiently and at no cost to us at all, at one of the busiest times of their year. For this we were and are hugely grateful.

By early December, the plaster was dry and we could start painting. Alexis divided the walls in half: the lower portion would be a jungle *khaki* and the upper an uplifting sky blue, and we would use rollers to apply the colour.

Rolling paint is somehow both meditative and exhilarating, and the boys, big and small, loved it. Listless, tired eyes would brighten as they entered the room and took their rollers and paint trays, working for as long as they liked before handing over to someone else just drifting in. There were disputes over tools, but generally the rhythm was easy, punctuated by outbursts of song, laughter, and group pauses for refuelling with *samosa* and *mithai*. In the office-clinic (also getting a make-over), Krishna and Rahul had a sort of Bollywood dance-paint thing going, energetically dabbing blue spots on the walls with the ends of their rollers and then rolling so fast over the top they blurred.

And as we painted, the work of the Trust continued in the background - medicines were dispensed, new arrivals were persuaded to return to their villages, or not. Issa came in with a bleeding gash in his head.

It took two long sessions to finish the base colours. And when there was no more sky to paint, there was the cooler, the cooler stand, the low side walls of the office and the exterior wall - all now blue. Nobody wanted to stop. Nervously, I checked in with Pramod, the contact point co-ordinator, “Is this okay?”, as blue escaped far beyond the bounds of the original scheme. “If the

LIKEABLE ANIMALS

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children are happy, then I am happy,” he replied serenely (on more than one occasion).

Once the jungle and sky paint had dried, Alexis began sketching animals and trees onto the walls freehand. An audience of adults - mostly the policemen who share their building with SBT - gave a critique which she took pretty well. First the tiger, then the elephant and peacock took form, later a giraffe and monkey, the parakeets and trees.

As the boys started to fill in the colour - three or four could work on one animal at any time - the animals came to life. I remember Deepak diligently painting the eyes of the peacock's feathers, quiet, smiling Sanjay perched up a ladder, colouring bold red the beak of a parakeet, bara Raju with his clumsy fingers filling in the brown of a tree trunk as carefully as he could.

Sanjay shone out as a talented artist with a deft hand and flair for colour and composition. He was always smiling and always there. Talking afterwards, Pramod says, “It was in him but he'd never done it, didn't know he could do it... and now we know his talent we are working with it.” They hope to get him to move into a shelter home where he'd be able to work seriously on his art but as with all these boys, he likes the freedom of his life, “for so many years we've lived according to our own will, to suddenly have to conform - our heart is not in it,” explains Hemant.

Many other talents emerged from our 10 days of painting. And the enthusiasm amongst nearly all of the boys was overwhelming - even, touchingly, for cleaning out the paint trays and brushes. “Oh help, what can they do?” murmured Alexis, as four teenagers waved paintbrushes in her face. Moving to the blue wall outside, she sketched four palm trees which they painstakingly coloured. Even the arrival of the Shatabdi didn't entice them away.

It was a great collaborative effort. As well as the fundamental contribution of CTC, The American Women's Association funded our painting materials (ever wondered where the profits from that big Mela go?), and children from Alexis's son's class at the American School decorated tiles for the walls. Led by Alexis and assisted by Roopi Saran and me, about 20 Salaam Baalak boys did the painting. We had other helpers too: art student Jessie, my children's ayah, and soft spoken much loved SBT teacher Mohini who reconnected with her inner artist. Anyone who walked in through the door was welcome to grab a paintbrush.

Visiting after a month, it looks good. There's still a glow. And the children and staff are really happy with their new space. With the kids, it's sometimes hard to get more than a “*babut badhiya*” or “*achcha laga*”, when talking about the project but it's clear that this is genuine and they all have their favourite animal and can point out with pride exactly the bits that they and their friends painted.

Like all of the kids, Hemant had only previously done art on paper, “I liked very much having the chance to paint on the walls and decorate my own space,” he says. Chota Raju agrees. He loves “looking at my work every day” and would like to learn more, but here, not in the shelter home. Sonu Pradip was very excited about the project from the beginning, but he imagined something much smaller scale, “just one wall”. He was happy to see so many walls involved, “even outside, so in the winter when we sit, we can feel our work.”

SBT social worker Makan Singh tells me about the new boys: “they come up the stairs, so scared in their hearts as they see the police station... then their fear disappears as they see the paintings; they think ‘this is a place that will do something for children’.” They're right of course. This place does a great deal for children who live the hardest of lives. And it's satisfying to have done something that may help, a little.

In January, Alexis and I travelled back from Jaipur on the Ajmer Shatabdi. Close to midnight, we were walking out of the station on the Paharganj side. “Charty, Charty, look! The blue, I can see the blue.” And I looked to my right and there it was: the intense blue of the sky that overspilled, plus a wisp of a monkey and a flash of giraffe. ■



(The Salaam Baalak City Walk is a great way to see this artwork by Alexis and the Salaam Baalak boys and to gain a fascinating insight in to life on the street. http://www.salaambaalaktrust.com/street_walk_delhi.asp, email: salaamwalk@yahoo.com, Ph: 9910099348, Timings: 10 am, six days a week Monday to Saturday, afternoons also possible on special request; duration: 2 hours

Alexis is known better for her beautiful paintings of monuments! Take a look at www.alexishallirwell.com

If you're an artist or an NGO working with kids and are interested in this kind of collaboration, please get in touch with Charty on artreachdelhi@gmail.com.

Charlotte Dugdale has lived in Delhi for most of the past 10 years. She helped research and compile the Youthreach book, If I Were Rain.)

