

To:**Date: 29th May 2011****~~Arne~~**

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Arne Gundersen, Lørenskog Rotary Club, Norway**Governor – Rotary District 2260 (2001-2002)**

Dear Arne

We met for the first time yesterday at the ten-year anniversary celebration of the Kottivakkam Dental Health Supporters Association that was held in Oslo. My wife and I both had the pleasure of taking part as dentists in 2005 and 2008 – an unforgettable experience!

The Kottivakkam Dental Health project

It was towards the end of 1998 that Nayeem Syed, a dentist from Lørenskog Rotary Club, took the initiative to start a dental clinic in India with the aim of treating the poor and underprivileged – most of them children. Lørenskog RC was supported by several other Rotary clubs in the district and, as you know, received Matching Grants from The Rotary Foundation, for which you yourself as DG at the time were mainly responsible. The project has since become a fantastic success. By means of dental examinations, fillings, gum treatment and not least assistance and guidance, some 100,000 patients have been treated up to the present day.

Up until 2006 participants in the project could claim support through Rotary Foundation grants to voluntary organisations. However, the general downturn in the global economic situation led to an immediate discontinuation of these grants. As a result, Nayeem had to go out with his begging bowl once again. Aided by a number of incredibly enthusiastic friends of the project, as well as the support of heaven and other deities, dentists everywhere started emerging from the woodwork! As Nayeem explained to us during the exceptionally successful jubilee celebration, most of the appointments are filled for the year 2012 as well as two months into 2013.

In projects such as this, it is imperative that we are able to rely on each other – trust in the recipient is an absolute must. Sam, who was our locomotive and guarantor in India, has undoubtedly been the reason why the project has lasted so long. Unfortunately Sam died suddenly in 2008 and his capable sister Sow is now looking after the finances.

The Kottivakkam IT Project

The idea of starting an IT project for young girls was conceived in 2004. By tradition, and in accordance with social customs in India, girls from very poor families have no means of escaping from poverty. Any unmarried girl has to fend for herself and is virtually “fair game.” In order to get married, the bridegroom’s demand for a dowry has to be met. Girls with drunken or penniless parents, or girls with no parents at all, have no means whereby they can scrape together the necessary dowry. If, however, she could obtain a paid job after lower secondary school, the girl would have an opportunity of saving money for her dowry, thus making it possible to marry someone who perhaps had a regular income.

If we could offer some bright pupils a basic and vocational-oriented training in information technology (IT), then those who completed the course would have the possibility of getting a good job and, at the same time, raise their own social standing. If the young woman could get a good job, the whole family would benefit. As far back as 2005 Nayeem had converted the entire basement of the main building as a schoolroom – at his own expense. Equipment, tables and chairs began trickling in from friends of the original dental project and from the newly established Kottivakkam Trust Computer School Supporters Association in Lørenskog. Furthermore, Sam and the omnipresent Venogopaal had contacts in local Rotary clubs that supplied the first two computers and software packages. Sam, who was an exceptionally talented leader, had been educated as a telecommunications engineer at The Indian Institute of Technology and was highly proficient in information technology.

By pure coincidence my wife (as teacher and assistant) and I (as a dentist) were able to attend the official opening of the IT school. This was during our first period as participants in the dental-health project in March 2005. Four bright girls completed the first course where they received training in the following programmes: Microsoft Office, Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Desk-Top Publishing. In addition they learned how to operate a programme called Tally, which is widely used for accounting and bookkeeping.

Here are Sam’s comments about this first course:

“I must mention here that two of the girls from this group have endeavoured to take an All-India Competitive Examination in the subjects taught in our computer school. The K T Computer School paid the examination fee for these two girls and both were awarded an “A” Grade Certificate in this competitive examination. In view of this, both girls were admitted to a college for a three-year degree course. The K T Computer School also helped these two students successfully obtain an education loan from a local bank.”

Soon after returning to Norway we met up at Bærum Rotary Club brimful with enthusiasm. Naturally we were over-enthusiastic and our eagerness was naturally received with a certain degree of scepticism. The club had neither a budget nor sufficient financial resources. We chose the begging-bowl option and the response was incredibly successful.

Initially the appeal was for contributions to a teacher's salary and the cost involved in an advanced course. Stord Rotary Club (South-western Norway) paid the salary and expenses of a teacher for the school's basic course. In 2006/2007, with Morten Berner as President in Bærum Rotary Club, we obtained a NOK 6,000 contribution from a special fund in District 2310 (Eastern Norway). Morten showed a particular interest in the project that developed at breakneck speed. By the beginning of 2008 the school had eleven computers, were running three classes of four months duration per annum, and was qualifying approx. sixty graduates every year. Sam was regularly sending information, accounts and pictures of grateful students. No dentists were working on the project in October 2008. My wife and I were longing to return to Kottivakkam; not least to meet Sam once again with whom we had established such good contact.

On the day of our arrival we are sitting in the day room at Kottivakkam – waiting for Sam. I had spoken to him on the telephone ten minutes earlier: "I am coming at three o'clock and am looking forward to showing you how fine its has become. The girls have put on their best clothes."

The telephone rings. Sam is dead! As a diabetes patient his heart had failed during dialysis treatment at the hospital.

By tradition the family and friends of high-caste Hindus congregate immediately after a death. We jump into our car and drive at full speed to Sam's home. The living room is packed. Sam is lying on the floor with his mother and daughter on their knees weeping over his lifeless body – altogether a very moving experience. He is removed immediately for cremation. We had to wait eleven days before taking part in the formal commemoration of our 54-year-old friend Sam's demise. Naturally, this tragic event was also a shock for the project and its progress. Without more ado, I grabbed the telephone and rang Nayeem who, unaware of what had happened, was with his unit at the clinic in Lørenskog. "You must come here at once, Nayeem," I implored. "Now, today. Cancel all your appointments!" Nayeem came and so did Venogolpool. My task was to restore routine at the computer school and, together with Kari Lotte, visit the schools that were scheduled for dental health-care inspection. In the evenings I visited local Rotary clubs to persuade members to recruit from among our recently qualified IT students. To say I was kept busy would be a massive understatement!

The end-of-term celebration was truly memorable. We invited all the pupils, past and present, to a party in Nageem's garden. What a sight! More than fifty beautifully dressed young ladies, and a fair number of local Rotary club presidents turned up for cakes and lemonade.

On arrival home, the attitude had changed drastically at Bærum Rotary Club. Everyone now agreed that the "India IT Project" ought to be the club's official international project under the slogan "Make dreams real." Morten Berner prepared a fabulous information sheet which he distributed to all members of the club. Based on Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus' seemingly successful micro-credit scheme, Bærum RC adopted a similar approach: Year one - NOK 10,000, year two - NOK 7,500, etc.

The problems in the wake of Sam's death are formidable, but fortunately we have Sow to look after financial matters. She has broad experience after having served in a high administrative position before retiring at 58. The ever-exuberant Venegopal is still very active and always willing to help in the sometimes obscure development. The Kottivakkam Dental Health Supporters Association, under the leadership of the resourceful Richard in association with Nayeem, was keen to start a separate support group for the IT project. The Kottivakkam Trust Computer School Supporters Association, inaugurated in 2005, has Sæming M Koppang as chairman. (See attachment for the latest audited accounts.)

Last year (2010) I received a Christmas card from Sow, who is responsible for the financial side of our project. She came up with two proposals, seemingly approved by the pupils. The girls themselves wanted to pay 200 rupees (100 rupees = NOK 13) into a kitty. The pupil with the best exam result would be given the whole amount. The other proposal is very reminiscent of Sam's reward scheme for the first pupils. The brightest pupils should be allowed to apply for a Government Certificate, which costs 2000 rupees. Such a certificate would substantially increase the chances of obtaining a good job.

Our family, which includes four adult children, became enamoured of this latter project. Instead of giving each other Christmas presents, we agreed to transfer money to our own India Fund to pay for Certificate applicants in the future. Yesterday I received a message from Nayeem that the class which started after Easter is fully booked, that many applications have been received for the rest of the year and that upwards of three-hundred students have graduated from the school up to the present.

We wish you all further success.

Kind regards

The Family. c/o Kari-Lotte and Rolf Gunnar Aspestrand