

INDIA CATARACT SURGERY PROGRAM: Our \$37 Cure for Blindness



Help the Aged youth intern Pam Naymark spent seven months providing support in Kakinada and wrote the profiles of Pokanati and Panthangi who are featured in this newsletter.

“I Only Existed to Eat and Sleep”

by Pamela Naymark
Help the Aged intern

Pokanati Atchamma (*photo below*) sits quietly, small and visibly confused by her surroundings. Completely blind, her limbs are thin and covered with age spots that have been further exaggerated from years of hard work under the harsh Indian sun. Her hands and feet are rough and deformed, while her toe and finger nails have split open or are missing altogether. But despite her withered appearance, when you approach Pokanati, her small body seems to grow in stature and her entire face lights up with anticipation. Impulsively you want to wrap your arms around this sweet lady – forgiving, delicate and kind. She personifies everyone’s favorite grandmother. Pokanati began losing her vision several years ago, only to become completely blind in both eyes two years ago. She has five children and several of her grandchildren stay with her and assist with daily activities. Unable to walk without assistance, she can no longer

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Canadian Volunteers in India are Saving Us Thousands of Dollars

by Pierre Barbeau
Executive Director

Help the Aged has always been very fortunate to attract compassionate and highly motivated Canadian volunteers and youth interns to assist us with our programs. We have over 100 volunteers helping us at all levels in developing countries and in Canada which greatly helps us to reduce our overhead costs. During the last fiscal year, our administration costs were only 4.1% and fundraising expenses added up to 2.3%. If we had to hire staff to do the work of our volunteers, overhead expenses would be too high and continuing our work with the poor under the circumstances would be very difficult to justify both morally and ethically.

We like to regularly inform you about volunteers who continue to play an important role and since the focus of this newsletter is on India, here is a brief description of just three of them who have made a difference (*see page 2*). Another pamphlet to be mailed to you later this year will review the important work of our youth interns in various other countries and in Canada.



This photo of Pokanati with a nurse was taken before her surgery at the Kakinada hospital. The 15 minute operation was a great success. Before surgery, she could only see outlines of people and objects.

All of your donations for cataract surgeries in India will be tripled by matching grants from the Alberta Wild Rose Foundation and the Manjari Sankurathri Memorial Foundation.

The Good Samaritans

by Pierre Barbeau

In terms of eye care programs, we have been working in Kakinada near the east coast of India for over 11 years with the Sankurathi Foundation which was founded by Dr. Chandra Sankurathi. Chandra (see photo). His phenomenal work with the poor was described in a one hour CBC documentary. Chandra decided to dedicate his life to help the poor of India following a tragic event in his life. His wife, Manjari, and his two young children were killed during the 1985 Air India bombing. At the age of 45, Chandra decided to resign from the Department of Health and Welfare, sold his house in Ottawa and returned to his birthplace in India. There, he began by using his pension plan income and other savings to build a three room schoolhouse and eye hospital. For more than eleven years, Help the Aged sponsored an average of 3,600 cataract

surgeries annually to benefit destitute seniors. All of these operations were completed at the Kakinada hospital.

Sarma (photo) has been on our Board of Directors for more than eleven years and continues to monitor and assist with our programs in India. He travels to Kakinada every year and prepares reports to CIDA and the Alberta Wild Rose Foundation on our behalf. He is also the Secretary of a Canadian charitable organization, the Manjari Sankurathri Memorial Foundation (MSMF) which works with us to support programs in Kakinada. In fact, our newest



This photo was taken several years ago in Kakinada and includes three volunteers who have anchored the eye care program from the very beginning. Sarma (left) and Chandra (center-rear) are with ophthalmologist Dr. V.K. Raju co-founder of Srikiran as he adjusts the slit lamp. Looking on is CIDA's Françoise Mailhot who was in India at that time evaluating several projects. Last year, a CIDA evaluator concluded in her report that the Kakinada program was one of the best development programs she had seen during the last 16 years.

cataract surgery program will be a cost sharing arrangement between Help the Aged, MSMF and the Alberta Wild Rose Foundation. Your donations will therefore be tripled by matching grants!

"I Only Existed ... " (continued from page 1)

cook or eat independently. Her husband died a year earlier, when she had already lost all sight. Being unable to take care of him while he was ill caused her great sorrow. Rendered useless by cataracts, tears further cloud her eyes when she recounts that in the past few years it seems like she only existed to "eat and sleep". Her eyes stare blindly as she implores us to "fix her sight so she can see and play games with her children once more and cook them meals" as she once did. Prior to her eye difficulties, Pokanati took great pride in working in the fields to support herself and her family.

Until she heard about the Srikiran eye camps sponsored by Help the Aged, she was entirely hopeless that one day she might see again. However, Pokanati was optimistic about the surgery she would have at the Srikiran hospital and informed me with unforeseen conviction that she would see me and her photograph after her surgery.

Just a few days, later her prediction came true.



The care and feeding of seniors who are bused in at the hospital from villages is included in our \$37 cataract surgery fee. Patients are tested at the hospital before surgery to determine the power of the intra-ocular lenses which will be provided during surgery. These lenses are for distance vision and the great majority of patients will never require eyeglasses.

“Give Me A Miracle”

by Pamela Naymark

For the last six months, Panthangi Chittemma's eyesight has become intolerable. She finds herself unable to recognize her neighbours and can no longer help look after her grandchildren to a full extent. At 73 years, she has seen a fair share of tragedy befall her family. Panthangi's husband and son both died 8 years ago and her two remaining daughters have lost their husbands. Panthangi is a tiny woman; she moves stiffly and clearly suffers from additional health problems. Aside from her eyesight, her greatest burden is her feet. Sometimes, the unrelenting burning in her soles prevents her from walking even a few steps. For almost two decades she has worked as a dobi



After her cataract surgery, Panthangi's eye bandages were removed and for the first time in many years, she could see clearly. From the hospital, she saw farmers planting seeds in nearby fields. For her, this image of new life was a symbol that her own life would begin again.

(washing clothes) but lately she spends her days looking after her grandchildren as best she can.

Her cousin also happens to be at the Srikan hospital undergoing a cataract surgery. She mentions that Panthangi is very loving with her grandchildren and takes better care of them than their own mother. She asserts that Panthangi does absolutely “everything” for these children. Panthangi tells us that she is hoping Help the Aged can give her a miracle by giving her back her eyesight.

When we visit Panthangi after surgery, her expression is calm and radiant. She tells us that when the bandages came off her eyes, she looked outside and was able to see farmers planting their seeds for the first time in a long time. She is shy to smile because of her missing teeth, but despite great efforts, her lips still curl up as she talks about greeting her grandchildren when she returns home.

Accepting the Challenge

by Pierre Barbeau

Jeannie Haynes-Stoll began her volunteer work with Help the Aged three years ago. At that time, she asked us to help the destitute elderly who were part of the Anglo-Indian community in Calcutta (now called Kolkata). Anglo-Indian seniors have been the victims of many years of racial discrimination as a result of being born with one British parent during India's colonial period. They were and continue to be reminders to some of the British domination which ended in 1947 and incurred the distrust and hostility of Indian nationalists.

When Jeannie called us asking to set up our Adopt-A-Gran sponsorship program for Anglo-Indians, we challenged her to help us recruit sponsors since this is by far the most difficult

task. She rolled up her sleeves and began speaking to friends and acquaintances. This led to interviews on radio and television and publicity in local newspapers. Thanks to Jeannie's determination, we now have 25 Anglo-Indian grans sponsored in Calcutta who receive food, medications, clothing and shelter on a regular basis.

This unplanned project took on a life of its own because of Jeannie's dedication. She has travelled to Calcutta twice at her expense to ensure that the program was being well managed. I spoke to Jeannie following her recent return from Calcutta and we agreed that eye care surgeries for Anglo-Indian seniors would be a top priority since so many are blinded by cataracts.

Our sincere thank you to



Help the Aged volunteer Jeannie Haynes-Stoll (left) just returned from India to assist with the Adopt-A-Gran program for Anglo-Indians in Calcutta. We are hoping to find a sponsor for 85 year old Mildred D'Cruze who is blind and is cared for by her brother and sister. Unfortunately, her blindness is not caused by cataracts and cannot be corrected. If you would like to sponsor Mildred through our Adopt-A-Gran program or want more information about her, please call Brenda at our office (1-800-648-1111)

volunteers like Chandra, Sarma, Diane and Rudi Machel and Susan Richards for their dedication to India's poor.

How our cataract program works and how costs are kept so low.



Each patient is tested for glaucoma before surgery. Tests are also done for diabetes and high blood pressure since a cataract surgery cannot be completed if these conditions exist.



Patients receive two injections of local anesthetic before surgery.

1. Villagers are informed by the Sankurathri Foundation that a free Help the Aged 'eye camp' will be held in their area on a specific date and that only the poor are eligible for assistance.
2. Elderly people who have eye problems receive a preliminary visit from Sankurathri medical staff at their village to diagnose their condition. A list of people requiring surgery is prepared.
3. A bus is sent to the villages during the morning to pick up the patients and transport them to the hospital.
4. Operations are done that same afternoon following tests to calculate the power of the intra-ocular lenses which will be implanted. A local anaesthetic is used for two injections, one near the eye and one close to the ear. The operation only takes 15 minutes. Patients are kept overnight at the hospital.
5. The following day, patients can return to their villages after an eye exam and training on the use of antibiotic eye drops. The drops are normally used every day for one month.
6. A few weeks later, a nurse returns to the village to evaluate each patient.

Total charge for these services = \$37



Since patients cannot afford transportation costs to the hospital, a donated bus picks them up at their village.



Antibiotic eye drops are provided to all patients following surgery. The drops must be used every day for four weeks.

Fifteen Minutes Towards A New Life

It is sad to think that many people blinded by cataracts for many years cannot afford the \$37 required for their surgery. Thanks to your generosity and the matching grants we have received over the years from organizations like CIDA, the Alberta Wild Rose Foundation and the Manjari Sankurathi Memorial Foundation, we have been able to complete more than 62,000 cataract surgeries since 1989. Your compassion towards the destitute we support allows us to continue reaching out to them and offer the fifteen minute surgeries which will change their lives.

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