



*The
Clarke School
for the Deaf*
Education

A diminutive looking girl of ten runs along winding paths in the early hours of the morning of a quaint town called Kotagiri. Running down the misty hillsides to keep herself warm she heads towards the local hospital. At her destination, she spends a few hours, assisting the sisters clean and dress wounds of patients, and dispensing medication to the ill. This is not a holiday or weekend activity, but a daily mission set by the child's mother, in order to cultivate in her the spirit of service. Her service done, she swiftly walks to the local bakery where her father has arranged a reward- "a queen cake, two biscuits and a cup of hot tea" are recollected lovingly. The child then heads for school where she is tutored and mentored by Franciscan Nuns.

The spirit of service having firmly taken root at a young age, drives her to become Secretary of Social Service during her college years at Ethiraj College, and then on to Gandhigram for a Special Diploma in Social Work. She then pursues a Master's in Education, and finds an opportunity to work with disabled children at The Little Flower Convent. Having shown her mettle at The Little Flower Convent, she earns a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Smith College, Massachusetts, USA. There she pursues a Master's program in Special Education for the hearing impaired. She is Dr P Leelavathy, Founder Director of The Clarke School for the Deaf. The idea of starting a school for the hearing impaired had started taking shape even when she was a student at the University of Massachusetts. On her return to Chennai, she tried getting back to The Little Flower Convent but was turned down. Nevertheless, she began working with under privileged children. She was joined in this endeavour by Founder Secretary Late Dr S.K.Nagarajan and her brother Late Mr.P.R.Rajamani, also a Founder Member.

Around this time, an article was published about her in The Sunday Standard; at the same time, a father was looking to educate his daughter who was hearing impaired - thus, Ms Apitha Prabhakar, a child of three, became the first student, and was soon joined by two more children with multiple disabilities. The institution started from Dr Leelavathy's



home in R A Puram. "Word got around and soon enough the school started admitting students from not just Chennai, but from as far away as Bombay and even South Africa. In course of time, the need to put up boarders also arose and so, the pressure was on to find a secure place of their own. We grew in strength from 3 to 30 and then 70 very fast, and soon the house was not enough. We found a place on R K Salai which was on sale. Not having funds to buy it up ourselves, we moved in, promising to leave if it was sold" narrates Dr. Leelavathy.

As the saying goes, "...when you want something really bad, the whole world conspires to give it to you." Their moment

came when a lady from Bombay brought her daughter to The Clarke School. Upon learning that the school did not own the building, she made arrangements through her employer - Union Bank of India- for a loan. Till date UBI remains a close associate and well-wisher of the school. And so came many other sponsors who brought assistance and have since maintained close ties with the school. It would be relevant to mention here that Dr. Leelavathy's dream school for the hearing impaired is the first institution of its kind on the Asian subcontinent. The good work of the institution took them to Villupuram, Pondicherry, Salem and other places where they were requested to set up similar schools and train teachers. Some of them have now

been taken over by the Government. In order to help rural children, they now have a school at Kelambakkam near Chennai.

Today the school has equal experience in handling children with hearing impairment, multiple disabilities (deaf-blind), learning disabilities as well as mentally challenged. When she is asked about the most challenging aspect of dealing with handicaps, Dr. Leelavathy says it is the parents and their attitude - they needed more support and counselling than their wards. The earlier a child is detected with the handicap, the easier it is to draw the child to assisted and specialized learning techniques - they grow up feeling secure and in fact handle their



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skills. Mr E Satish, a Canara Bank employee chairs Deaf Literacy programs all over India and is a much sought after artist through his "I have Vision" exhibits. To quote him, "Nothing is impossible in this world if approached with the right attitude." He now trains and strives to instil this attitude in other disabled employees. There are quite a few engineers and professionals engaged by the government and other eminent organizations like Infosys. There are numerous academicians and scholars in M. Phil and Doctoral programs in India and abroad. Students of The Clarke School have also represented the school and state at Sports meets.

Another celebrated accomplishment of Clarke School is the Sadhana Dance Division. Inability to listen to a rhythm has not kept

this enthusiastic group of dancers from creating aesthetic canvases of movement to melodies and rhythms. Dr Leelavathy was instrumental in inviting and involving eminent teachers like Narayane Venkasubramanian and Lakshmi Mahesh, who would develop techniques to encourage the inherent urge to dance that was present in these girls. The girls performed at the 20th Annual Deaf Olympics 2005 along with the Astad Deboo Dance Company going beyond expectations with no allowances for their disability and perfect synchronisation has become a habit for these girls who now travel the world as cultural ambassadors for India. R Kaarthika of The Clarke School now runs a Bharatnatyam school of her own with her husband in Puducherry. The deaf-blind and intellectually challenged students are given initial education and in addition provided with vocational training- printing technology, bead craft, etc. Ms Shazia Fathima who is deaf-blind excelled at Jewellery making and will represent the State at the National Abilympics - Abilympics is not about sports but vocational skills.

The Clarke School also runs a training program for teachers in Special Education. Teachers are trained to assess, counsel and prepare course plans for different levels of disability. Screening of children is done at camps to identify disability and address them accordingly. Hearing aids, cochlear implants and other technological devices are advised for children with simpler disabilities. Many parents who come to admit their child turn teachers and then go on to start schools for the disabled in their cities. There is an unrestricted sharing of techniques and ideas to deal with the varied nature of children coming from different environments and the range of disability. The school has provided training to teachers from Korea, Lebanon, Malaysia, and Singapore among other countries. Compassion and commitment are two qualities that teachers are required to possess as special children respond best to care givers who show reliability

and continuity said Ms Leelavathi. The school has a no denial policy - it takes in all handicapped children, from any strata of society, without compromising on quality of the education. About 20% of the schools finance comes from direct fees - the rest is from sponsors and well-wishers. The school does not have a permanent trust. The old students who come to school for the Annual Day Events and Workshops also contribute. The school plans to start an alumni association very soon. Dr Leelavathy quotes the example of her old student, Mr V C Rajesh who with a B. Sc and MCA now works with HCL Technologies. She emphasises that, with The Clarke School students placed in organisations like Infosys and HCL, in doctoral programs in India and abroad, holding positions as civil servants, there is no longer a stigma attached to disabilities. If the disabled are handled with compassion and their potential with consideration, there is huge human resource available. In fact they are willing to strive harder than others to become a part of the mainstream and to take responsibilities as good citizens. The yawning gap lies in the number of trained teachers and special educators. There are numerous schools offering Special Education and our Government wishes to promote inclusive education, but we need to reevaluate if we have qualified and committed persons- that is the issue at hand.

In a country where illiteracy is rampant, The Clarke School has for many years held the beacon to the cause of the disabled and championed the need to educate them. It has single-handedly brought about a change in society's attitude towards disability and imparted a never-give-up attitude to all its students. Besides pioneering the use of computers as an alternate medium of instruction in its classrooms, another practice, that the School put forth to the Chennai Corporation, and from which most of us Chennaiites have benefited is the subsidised rail/ bus pass for students. With numerous other "uncelebrated" contributions to Chennai, The Clarke School has played a large part in making Chennai a student and disabled-friendly city. The Clarke School for the Hearing Impaired - A Champion of Chennai!

deficiency in a positive manner. For instance, Apitha Prabhakar, the first student of the Clarke School, now 33 years of age, after initial training for her disability, made her way confidently through secondary school and college. She is now an employee of the State Bank of India. The older children who come in with additional psychological baggage and insecurity are more difficult to handle. Dr. Leelavathy knows all her children and is quick to point out that most of the students of the School are well placed and adjusted into mainstream society. She reels off names of old students and organizations where they are employed with confidence.

Academics apart, yoga, dance, music, art and craft are an integral part of the learning program leading to a wholesome upbringing. The teachers are trained to identify skills and train the students in that discipline - and a few others were employed in leading banks and training other disabled persons in soft