



Limitless Child International Plays it Forward in India

by Jenny Mills, MSW ('99)

When I decided to major in Social Work, I knew two things for sure: I wanted to work on issues of social justice and oppression and I had a strong desire to learn from and about other cultures. Whether by fate or luck, my first job after earning my BSW at USM was India Program Coordinator for an international adoption agency. Within only a few months, I had traveled to India and China, served vulnerable children in marginalized communities and knew that I had found my calling. That was 1994. In 1999, I earned my MSW from UNE. After trying a few years as a community based mental health case manager, a job that I loved, I knew where I belonged and returned to my calling; working with children living in the depravity that is orphanage life. For the next 14 years, I served the children of Nepal and India through adoption, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Fast forward to 2015, fueled by my passion for social justice, human rights and children's well-being, Limitless Child International was born. Limitless Child is a not-for-profit organization with a mission to provide opportunities to vulnerable children for a thriving childhood and hope-filled future. At Limitless Child, we fill a gaping hole in international children's services. Having worked with marginalized children and families for over 20 years, our team knew that children living in orphanages do not benefit from the billions being spent worldwide on orphan care. International aid organizations, both large and small, do not provide services to children living in orphanages. With some justification, most of the world's aid organizations condemn orphanages as magnets for child trafficking. More and more governments are encouraged or coerced to cease international adoptions and orphanage services all together. Between 2004 and 2014 there was a 75% decrease in intercountry adoptions, (46,000 down to 13,000). And the numbers continue to drop. In some countries, domestic adoption and other opportunities to move children out of orphanages have increased, but not in numbers that begin to address the need.

What all of this means for children is that they spend longer periods of time living in an institutional setting with less funding available to provide for more than the most basic needs for survival. The UN's Millennial Development Goals and new Global Goals exemplify the focus on child "survivability" and not children living outside of family care.

We created Limitless Child International because we believe that children have a need and a human right to do more than survive. We believe that every child deserves to have a childhood. Our experience and scientific research shows that access to play, exploration, community, and relationship form the foundation for a strong beginning, and a healthy, hopeful future.

Fast forward again to August 2016, Limitless Child International introduces Peer Sports and Play Soccer Exchange to members of the South Portland High School Girls Soccer Team and to 44 girls from the largest slums of Pune, India. Our Peer Sport program created an opportunity for both the U.S. girls and the girls in India. The U.S. group could become global citizens through travel, cultural awareness, human rights educations and connecting and with girls whose life circumstances are vastly different, but whose dreams and aspirations are very similar. The girls in India could develop a thriving childhood by getting outside, playing, learning, connecting and empowering their dreams.



With less than a month before our proposed date for travel, we found ourselves without a coach for the trip. Again, either fate or luck intervened and brought us Finn Ducker. Finn is a 2016 graduate of UNE's Applied Exercise Science Program and was, at the time, the Assistant Men's Soccer Coach for UNE. Finn's passion for the sport of soccer, his belief in the power of play as a mode of youth empowerment, and his own experience of having grown up in two different cultures made him a perfect fit for our program.

So, over the Thanksgiving recess, Limitless Child International's Peer Sports and Play Soccer Exchange was introduced. Our group of seven consisted of myself, Coach Finn, three South Portland High School students, a student from Maine College of Art, and Jill Greenlaw, a Maine based photographer. Our participants on the India side were girls whose lives are challenged by poverty, social constraints, gender based violence and a lack of access to many of the most basic elements of childhood such as play and sport.

Play Is Not Optional, It's Fundamental

Utilizing sports and play to improve the quality of life for children in vulnerable communities is part of Limitless Child's core mission and a basic human right for all children (Article 31 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child).

In India, Limitless Child partners with [ASHA \(Action for Self-Reliance, Hope and Awareness\)](#), a highly respected organization based in Pune. For over 30 years, ASHA has provided crisis intervention, counseling and empowerment to abused women and girls. With an ever-increasing number of domestic violence, dowry deaths, child brides and other forms of violence, ASHA's caring social workers are greatly needed by the communities they serve. Much of their work focuses on prevention and empowerment of girls from a young age. Limitless Child's Play it Forward Peer Soccer Program is a natural complement to this work.

The goal of this trip was to teach soccer to young girls. But soccer was not the end game. It was just the opening move. Most importantly, these 40 young girls were empowered. They were filled with laughter, energy and hope. They met kids and adults from Pune who served as examples of what their life could be. And with the girls from South Portland they connected on a personal level - in a way that no one could have imagined.



40 Became 44

Each day our South Portland Peer Coaches each worked with a group of the same 10 girls. They ranged in age from 9 to 17. They worked together in morning and afternoon soccer sessions. They shared snacks and meals together. They laughed, sang songs and made handcrafted gifts for each other. They honored each other at the banquet on the last night. And when it was time to head home, they shared their tears together.



Take The Bacon

The soccer clinic consisted of morning and afternoon sessions where Finn and the Limitless Peer Coaches ran the girls through basic drills and scrimmages with a few games thrown into the mix (Take the Bacon was the definitive favorite). What started out as shyness on all sides quickly transformed into “good job” and “great try”. Miscommunications were met with laughter, patience and the surprising ability of the young girls to translate for the Americans. By day 2 the shyness had been replaced by excitement and a hunger to communicate.

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Farewell, For Now

Our last day was punctuated by certificates of achievement and cards hand-made by the peer coaches for each participant. There were then a million hugs and declarations of friendship and as we watched the girls drive away, unexpected tears brought on by the depth of emotion. profoundly impacted. So much so that they are already planning their fundraising so they can go back and be with the girls from Pune again. And the girls in Pune found that they can indeed have a thriving childhood. They are all but demanding that Limitless Child and ASHA give them the opportunity to play soccer with the local coaches and kids every week. So needless to say, that is just what we are doing.



Next Steps

Limitless Child and the Peer Coaches will continue to raise funds to ensure that our 40 new soccer players can continue to develop their soccer skills. The girls are currently playing each Friday and we are working with ASHS to look for opportunities for the girls to join existing teams or create their own and participate in scrimmages with other teams.

We will also be heading back to Pune within the next year with a new group of Peer Coaches and a team of new and excited young women as we continue to *Play it Forward*.

More information about Limitless Child can be found at www.limitlesschildinternational.org on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and by contacting Jenny Mills directly at jennym@limitlesschildinternational.org or +1.202.531.9824.