

On Jan 18-20 2009 Kyle Davis and myself visited Kandy to meet with the Pahansila volunteers, teachers, and partners. The below is a synopsis of my findings.

Polgollawatte School

After greetings by the Principal, staff, and students we toured the school facilities. My first impression of the school is that it is no longer a drab colorless collection of cinder blocks. The interiors were covered with colorful posters, paintings etc. The students appeared to be well supplied with writing utensils, paper, crayons etc. The teachers also appeared to have supplies they needed to properly teach. This was not the situation several years ago when we started to work with Polgollawatte.

In discussions with the Principal, the school enrollment has gone from 150 students, to nearly 200. Even more positively, their national test results have gone from bottom quarter, to middle of national average. Nande believes, besides raising the quality of teaching, this is partially because some of the better students in the area no longer feel they must go into Kandy to get a quality education.

Since the last year (I hope I got this right), they have started teaching English in grade 1. A good initiative, as the new national curriculum does not start till grade 3.

One item made me very proud of our association with Polgollawatte School is 5 of their graduates from last year completed vocational training and all had quality employment upon graduation. The Principal showed with pride the graduation certificates and graduation pictures. Seeing those certificates and pictures to me confirms that our efforts and work are impacting the lives of young Sri Lankans.

The main item for discussion was the purchase of two additional computers and retaining a computer tutor for the school. We met with the proposed tutor. As Kyle pointed out, he had very good English skills, and reviewed in detail the proposed curriculum. The curriculum was well thought out, and appropriate for our goals. Several factors to consider. First, computer skills are now a part of the national curriculum. (And with an OL's/AL's component I believe). Secondly, per our discussions during dinner, the Pahansila staff believes to retain good students Polgollawatte School needs access to computer classes. And thirdly, from observing classes at the vocational school, computer skills are an important part of many programs.

The Principal requested two additional computers plus retaining the computer tutor (\$25/month). We visited a computer store in Kandy. \$200 per computer (plus monitor costs) should give the school what they need. Plus they requested funds for educational CDs. (10 CDs at \$5 each). I would support funding the above for the reasons given. I believe 3 years ago the need for computers was not as critical. But now, it is minimally perceived as core item for a successful education.

Above all in my opinion, the Principal at Polgollawatte School has been a great partner for Pahansila. Every time I visit, I can see he has used our resources to great effect.

Sarana Sevana Orphanage

Kyle and myself visited Sarana Sevana on Jan 19th. First, we inspected the physical facilities at Sarana Sevana. The kitchen items we purchased were well appreciated. The rice cooker and blender is a big quality of life improvement for the matron and her helpers. Dollar for dollar, our best investment. The chimney has been fixed, so that the smoke no longer drifts into the cooking area.

The grill and door to secure the building from dogs and bats have not been procured and installed. Several months ago, they had some interest from bidders, but nothing firm. Nande believes that as the local economy slows down, and raw material costs come down, they might get renewed interest in completing the project.

The local volunteers discussed getting a hot water heater for the showers. But in conversation from Nande, that did not seem to be a priority.

The Sarana Sevana facilities, particularly the kitchen, overall is in much better condition than 3 years ago when we started to assist them. They have been good stewards of our funds and the Kandy Buddhist Association truly seems to have the children's best interest at heart.

The inmates put on a very nice music and dance review for the Pahansila volunteers and guests. Kumari, the new music teacher did a wonderful job. I could see the children really enjoy this part of their lives. For quality of life, I think starting up the music tutoring is one of our better programs. Unlike cricket, all ages can participate and enjoy.

From the tutors and the teachers at Watapuluwa School, we are having a positive impact in the children's lives, per our mission. One child entered Sarana Sevana at age 10. He could not read or write, now 18 months later he has caught up with his peer group. The Principal at Watapuluwa told of one of our students who entered Sarana Sevana at age 15. He could barely speak and engage socially due to his disadvantaged background. Now he plays cricket at recess.

The only additional budget adjustment I think we need to make is to purchase a drum for the music classes. I believe it is a traditional drum from the Kandy area. Total cost would be \$65 USD. In review of the situation, this is probably better investment than cricket gear, as all can enjoy.

Weerodara School

On Tuesday Kyle, Nande, and myself visited Watapuluwa School which the orphans from Sarana Sevana attend. We met the Principal Capt. R.P Lal Dharmasiri (J.P.) (Retired Army Officer). Although he spoke very limited English, we could tell immediately he was a ball -of-energy go-getter. He spoke with pride of his staff and students, of what they have accomplished with little resources. We toured the school, guided by his English speaking teachers. I believe the physical facilities were in better condition than Polgollawatte. The teachers proceeded to tell us that Capt. Dharmasiri spent many hours of his own time painting murals etc on the walls to give it a more pleasant environment for the students.

One immediate need we saw was a library, similar to our first visit to Polgollawatte. They had books in their library. But the books were so old and in such bad shape that my guess was they were a gift from Queen Victoria on her Diamond Jubilee. Similar to how we started with Polgollawatte, I think a good start of our relationship with Watapuluwa would be to procure a library for them similar in cost and quantity to what we provided Polgollawatte (plus cabinets).

The only other item concerning Watapuluwa that comes to mind, would be Nande and Sube informing the Principal of our vocational school program and relaying to them any potential needy candidates.

To me the nice aspect of working with Polgollawatte and potentially Watapuluwa is that the infrastructure is already in place. The faculty is in place, the students in place, the classrooms do not have to be arranged. All we do is give them the booster shot so they may provide a quality education for their students. The time spent by our local volunteers I would think is much less in working the schools than our other projects.

The only item yet to cover was discussions with Nande on the transition from primary school to vocational school. As our programs matures, we will encounter more students who have the talents and desire to attend vocational school, but no where to live. We discussed boarding them with families or possible renting a house and retaining an adult supervisor. (i.e. retired military officer or similar adult who can deal with teen age males). Just as equally we should consider the above for female students as this is also a very critical time in their lives. Something to discuss for later this year, if we pick up Watapuluwa, we could start sending an even larger number of students to vocational school.

I believe if we pick up Watapuluwa, we will be of the critical size we need. Bigger will not be better. We have built a wonderful program as a team over the last 4 years. A team that I am very proud to be a member of. I believe we have the proper structure, the right volunteers, and excellent teachers. It's now the grind of daily execution from the staff in Kandy that will make '09 a very successful year. Thank you again for all of your work. I don't think I could find a better team to help me meet my original goal of "Investing in the Lives of those at the Bottom of the Pyramid."

Kelley Davis