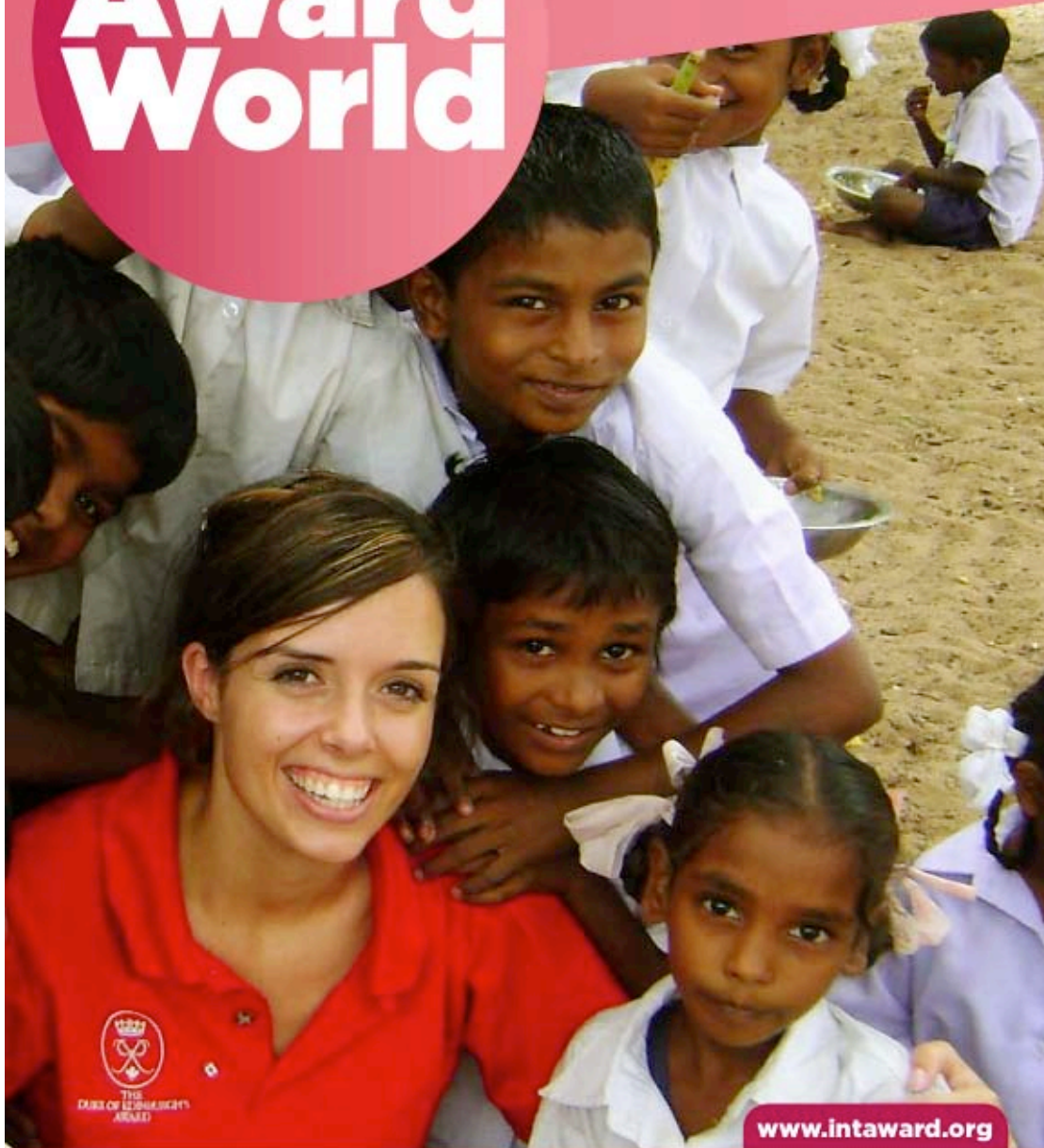


Illustrating the work of the International Award globally through case studies, features and best practice

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In this issue

- > Pieter Verhoog on how the Award changed his life
- > Section spotlight: Service
- > Foreign connections: Gold Award holders
- > Tips on how to take a good Award photo





Foreign connections

From a chance meeting at the last International Gold Event (IGE) in Hong Kong, two delegates dreamt up a project that would show the Award's capacity to forge new friendships and transgress borders. Rosalyn Yake from Canada tells us about her Indian adventure.

I first met Anantha Naryana, a Gold Award holder from India, three years ago in the heat of southern China at the IGE 2005 where we were challenged to devise ways the Programme could affect global issues including poverty. We volunteered at a school in a poor community in the hills of China where children lived in shanty houses and had little more than a banana to eat for lunch. And this inspired us to develop a project to help students back in Anantha's hometown of Chennai in India. After the IGE, we stayed in touch through email and this year, Anantha helped organise the volunteer experience of a lifetime - a 21-day adventure in three different locations related to the IGE's theme of poverty.

Culture shock

During my trip, I stayed with Anantha's family, which was a bit of a culture shock as there were many things I had to adapt to. Many Indian families don't use knives and forks so I learned to eat with my hands and

Anantha's family are devout Hindus so I had to acquaint myself with religious practices including praying in the family's 'pooja' prayer room before eating dinner. A home stay is a great way to gain an insight into another way of life and Anantha's family were very welcoming - it really added to my whole experience.

Back to school

My first placement was at Olcott School in Tamil Nadu. Since 1894, the school has been providing free education to the city's 'untouchables' - the lowest class of India's ancient caste system, which deems fishermen and tradesmen as third-rate citizens. The children of this caste are denied

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the right to education and have been reduced to a life of begging and crime on the city's streets.

By undertaking the Programme, students at this school are given an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and gain a sense of accomplishment. They volunteer at elderly people's homes, go on camping expeditions and gain workplace values such as time management and goal setting. They strengthen their CVs and gain experiences usually only achieved by students in private schools. In this way the Award helps bridge the gap between the rich and poor.

While at this school, I embarked on two service projects including a trip to an elderly people's home where I helped students put on an afternoon concert. I also undertook a trip to a polluted river near the Bay of Bengal, picking up garbage along the shore and learning about mangrove trees. What I enjoyed most, however, was watching how even against the backdrop of poverty, this school's children didn't forget how to play.

The Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF)

My next placement was at SCARF, which is connected to the World Health Organisation and houses around 150 mental health patients. Supported by Award participants, SCARF raises awareness about mental illness and reaches out to poor and at-risk communities by providing its services free of charge.

Although my stay was short, I got involved in a whole range of fulfilling activities from conducting social skills sessions to helping with craft classes. It was moving to see how organisations like SCARF are helping families whose breadwinner can no longer work due to mental illness, even paying for their children's school fees. This is vital in a country where illness only exacerbates the miseries entrenched in poverty, especially when healthcare comes at a cost.

Different worlds

My final stop was Bakthavatsalam Vidyashram School, where uniformed children and the buzz of electricity and air conditioning are stark reminders of the luxury that typifies a private school education in India. It's hard to believe that just outside its gates are beggars on sidewalks and barefooted mothers swaddling babies outside mud huts.

Recognising this disparity, the school and the Award run a non-profit nursery centre feeding and caring for about 50 children under the age of six. All from poor villages nearby, they are given the nutrition and socialization to have a good start in life.

At this school, I spent time with the nursery, reading Canadian storybooks to younger classes, and spoke to Indian Award participants about their own experiences. From embroidery to camping on tiger reserves, Award activities mirror this diverse and adventurous country. Like our Canadian dog sledding and snowshoeing expeditions, the Indian Award embraces the heart of its own culture.

Looking back

Reflecting on the past three weeks, I feel grateful for the connection I made with Anantha at the IGE in 2005.

Together we planned an incredible trip and proved that the Award can make a dent in the pandemic of poverty. With the help of The Duke of Edinburgh's Award in Canada, I'm now planning a fundraising project to assist the Olcott School with meeting the nutritional needs of its students. International Award friendships are unique and really do have the capacity to make a difference.

Left:
Rosalyn with children from the Olcott School.

Above right:
Rosalyn and Anantha's family.

Below:
An Award participant clears rubbish at a polluted river near the Bay of Bengal.



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Tips on organising your own IGE inspired adventure:

Make new friends

Make the most of your time at the IGE by talking with delegates from different countries. This is a good opportunity to make new friends and build contacts - you never know where it might lead. When you get home, stay in touch by email and through the IGE Facebook group.

Do your homework

If you decide to plan an Award based trip or project, do your research so you can make the most of your experience. What are the volunteer needs of any places you'd like to visit? How can you add value to the Award nationally or internationally through your project? Think of local organisations you can co-operate with or contact your local Award office for advice.

Start small

Start with a simple plan and build as you go, being realistic about what you can achieve. Keeping a photo or souvenir of the IGE is a good way of keeping you inspired once you return home.

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