Saphara celebrates our 10th birthday!

It has been an amazing journey over the past 10 years - 1,000 Northern Irish young people and teachers (plus a few mums!) have journeyed to India for a life-changing experience. Thousands of Indian children from the poorest communities have received a quality education and many girls have pursued their dream of going to college with a Saphara scholarship.

At a Thanksgiving Service in November, members of the very first Saphara school trip in 2009 shared the impact of the trip on their lives. Kirsten Ross (wearing her 2009 hoodie!) shared how her Saphara journey has shaped her life as a nurse. She is now studying International Relief medicine in order to take up new challenges. Teachers on that same team, Andrea Cuthbert and Ruth McKibbin, had journeyed with Christine even earlier – on the first Methody India team in 2001 which had inspired Andrea, then a 17-year-old, to train as a teacher. Many more teachers and students shared how Saphara had inspired them – with many messages from young people as far away as New Zealand, South Africa and Canada.

It was wonderful to have Semeda Steves who heads up Saphara’s Girl Champions programme in India at the service. She told of how this innovative programme is reaching 3,000 girls this year – with the transformational message that they are of immense value and worth.

You can become a Girl Champion by sponsoring Chandani and young women like her. Details in leaflet.

Irish Ambassador supports Saphara Girl Champions

We were delighted to showcase this work in a two-day event to senior development leaders in Delhi this July. Dominic Breen and I hosted the event, the highlight of which was the contribution of three young women – Vinita (right) and Radha, both Master trainers, and Ritika, a school girl from Kaplani High. As they led opening circles and spoke confidently and passionately to the assembled dignitaries, all were impressed by this living proof of the impact of the programme.

Dominic writes “It was great to hear all our partners speak about the positive impact of the Girl Champions programme and good to be able to give a platform where all could share their experiences and build relationships of mutual support. It was good to have leaders of many like-minded organisations including Habitat for Humanity, UM and Caritas attend and it was an excellent platform to disseminate knowledge and experience of the programme. All were struck by the very positive experiences shared, particularly by the young women from SNEHA and Kaplani. There is great potential to expand the Girl Champions programme. I would like to thank the Irish Ambassador, Mr Brian McElduff, for generously funding the event.”

Chandani’s life-changing work

One of the most exciting things about our Girls programme is the impact on the lives of the young women who lead it. Semeda writes:

“Chandani is a young woman from a poor Muslim community in Lucknow. Her very traditional father only allowed her to attend school because her mother worked in the school kitchen. However, once she graduated at 17, she was no longer allowed to leave the house. Then a local NGO launching the Saphara Girl programme was looking for young women to be part-time facilitators - running the programme in local schools. They approached Chandani’s school principal who recommended her. Chandani was keen to take this up but her father was resistant – but when assured that Chandani could run the programme in her old school he agreed. From the first day, Chandani embraced the training – learning about her character strengths, goal setting, and how to speak assertively helped her to discover her own value and worth. When she started work, she discovered a real talent for connecting with the girls who began to share their problems with her. Her progress was noted by the senior trainer and when a new master trainer was needed, Chandani was recommended. There were, however, major challenges to be faced; she would now be working full-time, travelling to the NGO office and to different schools. She would also need to attend a week-long training course in Delhi. After much discussion with the NGO, her parents finally agreed that she could take the post and travel to Delhi in October 2018.

“It was then that Christine and I met Chandani and we were both impressed when her initially shy disposition was replaced by a confidence – especially as she spoke to the Saphara Irish student team about the important work she is doing. She is a true Girl Champion!”
SNEHA flood and other Reflections

When we were in Dehradun this July, a dreadful flood devastated SNEHA school as reflected in this piece by Jenny Jose, a student from Assumption Grammar School.

“I want to start by saying that I have never met more inspirational people than the teachers and students here at SNEHA. Everyone was so deeply moved after the events of yesterday’s terrible flood… from what we have seen, this community is unstoppable, and your hardworking spirit and perseverance has inspired us all to become better people.

Despite being unable to spend as much time with you as we wanted to, the pupils and teachers here at SNEHA have left a huge impact on us… and we are very sorry that the circumstances prevented us from teaching you more and prevented us from learning more about you. So on behalf of the Down team, thank you so much. We will keep you in our prayers and our memories forever."

Bangor Halloween School Team

Jo Holland writes:

“My first year as Saphara Education Director has been a busy one with one hundred students and teachers coming to India over the past six months. In October 2018, Paula Strong and I had the great pleasure of leading a new Saphara Shared Education team comprising of students from Bangor Grammar School, St. Columbanus College and Bangor Academy.”

Their experiences and those of the Lurgan & Holywood and Down summer teams are reflected here:

My trip to India has been full of so many different types of emotions. Happiness, sadness, anger, excitement and many of these emotions were all experienced on the same day and even in the same hour.…. Gandhi said, ‘In a gentle way, you can shake the world’ and I believe that we have.

Caitlin Nicholl, Bangor Academy

India is a truly addictive country. The busyness, the chaos and the excitement of India is palpable every second of every day. This place ceases to be a country but is a living thing; everything feels alive… I laughed and cried in the space of an hour and I am a better person for it. I owe so much to the children I worked with… if I could show half the resilience, determination and passion they did I would be happy. This trip has completely changed my outlook on every aspect of my life.

Lewis Joyce, Bangor Grammar School

From the moment we stepped off the plane in India it has been a trip like no other. India is both mesmerising and hard hitting. The sights we have seen have been enlightening and inspiring… I am so grateful to the children who have taught me and changed me as a person. I am very grateful to the Saphara leaders for giving me this opportunity and for taking such good care of me.

Ellen Egan, St. Columbanus College

Saphara: journey with purpose. I don’t think anything sums up my experience throughout the past 16 days more. The purpose of Dr Reeta, the truly inspirational principal of SNEHA: educating, supporting and simply showing what a strong woman can achieve. The purpose of Donk and Kaplani: providing an education to even the most rurally situated children. We learned to appreciate that there is no greater gift than love. In my eyes, this is what Saphara is: generosity of the heart.

Meabh Turbitt, St. Ronan’s College

My second journey with Saphara has been wonderful in many ways. Through the interactions with my fellow teachers, our wonderful pupils and our very special hosts it has served to impassion me more than ever to love the poor. My key learning points could be summarised in two words: courage and listening. Seeing the difference that acts of faithful courage have made in the lives of pupils at Kaplani and SNEHA has been truly humbling. Seeing the wisdom in the leadership of Surender, Dr Reeta and Ronjoy; they listen so intently, and give a voice to the poor which has taught me much. It is a privilege to partner with them.

Andrew Miller, teacher, Down High School

On Saphara’s most recent trip to India, it was clearly evident that amidst immeasurable poverty and extreme social and economic inequalities, the charity is providing opportunities where previously there were none, simply and effectively through the most basic of human rights - education. It is easy to see why teams return year on year to SNEHA and Kaplani, fostering resilience and achievement, raising awareness and above all building hope of a better future for each of them and their families. Saphara will forever hold a special place in my heart.

Celine Moore, teacher, Priory Integrated College