

Priyanka Singh, Gone But Not Forgotten



Some years ago while traveling throughout India looking for organizations in need of help in their service to the poor, I came across a school located in a slum in the city of New Delhi. The school was one of the worst resourced schools I had ever seen. The classrooms were in an open air yard with no protection from the heat, and children went to the bathroom in one of several holes in the ground behind a fence. Tuition was five rupees a week, but even though that was very little, several children could not afford the fees and those were the children who were not given uniforms. To many, this made it very obvious which were the children who were the poorest of the poor and possibly the lowest of the low. Little Priyanka Singh was one of those children.

At the time, Priyanka was about five years old. When I saw all the children without uniforms and imagined how some must have felt about themselves and how they could be so easily identified as somehow not worthy, or worse, inferior, I told the school that I would immediately buy all the children who didn't have a uniform, a uniform of their own.

That day, we took pictures of the children. Priyanka, who rushed to put on her new uniform, pushed all the boys aside so that she could show off her new look and, maybe, for the first time not hide in the back of her kindergarten class. After seeing what little Priyanka had done and how her face was so lit up by so little, I decided to formally sponsor this child and pay for all of her continuing education. Knowing, however, that the school she was attending could never provide her with a decent education, The Forgotten International began to support her through our Children's Fund, and, shortly thereafter, we got her admitted to a private school not far from the slum where she lived.

At her new school, Priyanka thrived, and in spite of living in a one-room shack with a family of six, she found the time each night to study and try to keep up with the far more privileged children at the school she was now attending. This was very hard for her, for in a 10x10 room that her whole family occupied every night, it was nearly impossible to find even an inch of space where she could read or work on the problems that her teachers had given her for homework. Nevertheless, Priyanka pushed on.

Then came the day when I heard that Priyanka, while home alone, was attacked by an unknown intruder. By then, she had reached the 10th grade and was in the process of starting her homework while her mother went out to pick up one of her other children from an after-school program some distance away. Upon her mother's return, she found Priyanka near death, apparently from strangulation. Help was called, but Priyanka died on the way to the hospital. Being that she was poor and lived in one of thousands of slums in New Delhi, the police took no notice nor made an investigation, and Priyanka, coming from a Hindi family, was cremated shortly after she was pronounced dead.

We knew her from age five until shortly after her 17th birthday. In my mind, it is easy for me to piece together a collage of scenes of her as a barefoot child walking to school in her new uniform or playing behind her home among the wild pigs and the garbage they fed on, and as she grew, how her face would continue to light up when she talked about maybe someday coming to America. She was ambitious, often telling me how she wanted to grow up and to one day become an airline pilot. I would tell her that being a pilot is not an easy task and that she would have to work hard on her math and science skills and continue to practice her English. She would always say, "Yes, sir". Sir was the first word she ever learned in English. Always smiling, always optimistic, and always happy although she had so little. She was a gift to all of us at our foundation, one that will never be forgotten.

For one we knew for all too short a time, I know that all of us at our foundation will miss her dearly.

Thomas Nazario
President and Founder
The Forgotten International
www.theforgottenintl.org

The Forgotten International
P.O. Box 192066
San Francisco, CA 94119
info@theforgottenintl.org