



A Network of Love

In these times of uncertainty and child abuse for many young children, here is a beautiful story of hope. At Udayan Care, abandoned or orphaned children find mentor parents to grow up with and a family to belong to, forever.

Imagine that your own children have grown up, moved on to colleges and jobs and to start families of their own. Would you dream of becoming a parent again, and not to one or two children, but to a dozen? This is what 35 people – mostly women, but four men and counting – have chosen to do under the umbrella of an organisation called Udayan Care. They are “mentor parents” to small groups of children who have been orphaned or abandoned.

In the 1990s when Kiran Modi wanted to start a home for children she considered deeply the question of “how to bring a sense of belonging and bonding to children who have lost all trust?” Her answer was to combine the foster care model of the West with India’s

existing orphanage system and look for women and men who would take on the responsibility - this is crucial, voluntarily and for life - of raising a small number of children together in a family environment. Her husband was sceptical. “Where will you find such people?” he asked, “They would be God’s gift to earth!”

Today groups of children live together in 13 Udayan Ghars, in middle class neighbourhoods in Delhi, Noida and Gurgaon, in Kurukshetra and Jaipur. They go to English medium schools. Full time supervisors and caregivers live with them. A strong mental health programme and experienced social workers help them through their troubles. Tutors and volunteers support their studies. But at the heart of this well-structured system

and what sets it apart from others like it are the mentor parents.



When Madhu Gupta met Kiran Modi and saw the first Udayan Ghar, her decision was immediate. “I will give you your second home, I will join you,” she said. She purchased a ground floor DDA flat in quiet and leafy Mayur Vihar and opened the first Ghar for boys. She opened a second Ghar in the same neighbourhood a decade later.

Long before the Right to Education (RTE) Act was passed in 2009, Madhu was a one woman RTE phenomenon, gaining her first batch of boys admission, with vastly reduced fees, into several

prestigious schools. From that batch, one boy is now studying hotel management, another engineering, and a third is employed by the Taj Group.

Madhu visits her Ghars for several hours three or four times each week and is on the telephone to the supervisors, caregivers and social workers every day. At the moment she is working to get two new boys into schools and she is excited about the “aftercare” facility she set up recently in Mayur Vihar, a place for the boys to live when they reach 18 and are required by law to leave the home.

Her parenting approach is deeply practical with an eye fixed firmly on her boys’ futures - inculcating healthy saving habits for example. Madhu’s father used to say “A dog also fills his stomach. If you are a human being, you must work for others.” He saw god in people, not in temples and mosques and he saw all people as equal. “You are just a drop in the ocean,” he would say. These are the values Madhu lives by and which she tries to pass on to her boys.



Dolly Anand laughs as she tells me, “I met an old friend at lunch yesterday, we haven’t met for years, and she said, ‘You are busy, what have you been doing? Partying?’ ‘No’ I said. ‘I am bringing up 12 children and it’s not a joke!’ We’d known each other while raising our own



kids. And now here I am back to it again with 12!” Then she adds, “But it’s the best thing that ever happened to me.”

We are sitting in the spacious basement of the Ghar that Dolly and four friends set up in Mehrauli in 1999. She has already been briefed on the details of house goings on by much loved supervisor, Kalpana. She has greeted the girls who have returned from school with warm hugs and questions about their day. One of them is making eye masks, scores of them, from card, coloured tape, chopped up wedding invitations and string - they are to be a surprise for the birthday party tomorrow.

Dolly explains to me that as well as overseeing all the practical aspects of life here, she helps the older children with their studies and she does a lot of listening. “I found that it makes a lot of difference if you hold them close and try to understand their problems. So, this is my sofa and the girl who has to chat with me curls up with her head in my lap and

we go through what she is feeling, what her problem is,” she says.

She recounts an experience from her early days when a young girl of five described in detail the sexual abuse she had suffered at the hands of a relative. She recalls her horror and the physical feeling that accompanied it, like suffocation. Later, while driving home, “My mind was so full of what she had gone through that I was going on in a kind of daze, suddenly my eyes brimmed over and I couldn’t see the road.” Horrible though it was, this incident helped Dolly to realise how important love was in their lives.

The birthday party the next day could not have been a more love-filled family celebration. The basement is bedecked with balloons. A feast is laid out - including three birthday cakes in different flavours and Usha Aunty’s famous egg sandwiches. Gathered together are the children of the Ghar, all the mentor mothers along with members of their families, and volunteers and friends of all



ages. The girls dance for us, the mask maker ties her masks - adding a dash of the carnivalesque. After singing happy birthday six times we tuck into the feast. Later all the children - including my own daughter, absorbed immediately into the warm atmosphere of the home - roar around playing hide and seek.



Isabel Sahni explains that she likes to get the girls of her Sant Nagar Ghar to sit around the kitchen table and eat together like a family. The *karela* is not popular, "Auntie my stomach is full," the girls whine, but eat it anyway, at Isabel's insistence. Conversation centres on school. One of them has just won medals for sprinting; another has a project on "Delhi Heroes" and is wondering who to choose. Isabel suggests their "Bua", Kiran Modi, the founder of Udayan Care and the original mentor mother of this home. (The girls are thinking more along the lines of actresses.) There is banter and laughter and an argument between two spirited sisters. Isabel has recently bought new bras for the older girls and wants to know if they are finding them comfortable.

As a young girl growing up in a Methodist Christian family in England, Isabel had

thought she would become a missionary doctor. She didn't get good enough grades for medical school but ended up falling in love with an Indian Chartered Accountant and moving to India in 1971. Years later she came to Udayan Care after the death of her son, "I was looking around for some place to go as a testament to Prahlad, really," she says, adding that because all the children went to English medium schools, she felt she could be of real use here.

She usually comes to the Ghar three or four times a week. And when she isn't there, she often thinks about the girls - imagining ways to make their learning more fun (homemade volcanoes with vinegar and baking soda) or pondering why a slow learner who shines at her school is so quiet in the house. "They give you so much love actually: when you're there, time just flies," she says. "Yes you have sleepless nights, most definitely. When exam results are coming up, it's as if our own children's results are coming. But I don't have any stress when I'm with the kids; all of that fades away."

To meet the Udayan children and alumni is to realise the extraordinary effectiveness of this group foster care model. They come from difficult and sometimes deeply troubled backgrounds yet emerge

as self-assured, confident adults able to negotiate their way in the world. They find decent jobs; they make happy marriages - 13 so far (all organised by the mentor parents) and there are now nine Udayan grandchildren. And who do the young Udayan mothers call in the middle of the night when they are worried about their colicky babies? Their mentor mothers.

Gurmeet Udayan came to Dolly Anand's Ghar in Mehrauli when she was eight. Last year she graduated from Sanskriti School and she is now studying journalism. She hopes to become a news anchor. "When a child has had a horrible past, it's really very difficult for her," she says - from experience. "Hats off to our mentors. They *really* help a child to come out of it, the patience and the love they handle you with. It's amazing." Patience, love, commitment, honesty: these are the qualities that come up again and again.

Except for the fact that they don't live together, the mentor parents of Udayan Care really are like parents to their Udayan children. They care and nurture in that all-encompassing unconditional way only a parent can, from overseeing the practicalities of day to day life to thinking about their children's futures long before they do. They invest time, love and energy in unquantifiable amounts. They never leave - continuing to parent even while battling cancer - and nor would they dream of leaving. Dolly speaks for many of them when she says, "It's been a lovely journey so far and I think it's the best thing that has ever happened to me in my life."

Charty Dugdale
The author is a freelance writer based in Delhi. She writes on social issues, arts and travel. She has recently set up a not-for-profit organization that links artists with children's NGOs and raises funds for collaborations.