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BHAGYA RANGACHAR -----A LADY WITH A MISSION

Bhagya Rangachar has lived in the US and worked as a Software Professional for decades. However even then, her first love was supporting the needs of the less fortunate and so she worked for the Blind Association in Maryland as both a volunteer and then later as the Executive Director. Like all Indians after 'making good' in a foreign country, an overwhelming desire to return to Mother India and use the technology acquired to help our own seems to be the norm with most returning NRI's. Bhagya is one such NRI, who has created the Children's Lovecastle's Trust (CLT) "to build conducive, interactive and creative environments in education through community awareness, nutrition aids, and alternative educative means to support children's education." Slim and intense, Bhagya is completely committed to her vision of "combining the power of technology and the convenience of the school system to make community education more effective and efficient."

Walking around the architect designed premises being hastily completed for the official opening Bhagya explains that she began the organization 5 years ago. Fresh faced little ones crowd a room where they are allowed to compose their own digital music and burn CD's of the tunes. Slowly we begin to realise that CLT is not a school, it is a programme which includes Mid-Day Meals, an Intel Computer Club House, Home Work Labs, Health Awareness camps, Youth Empowerment Programmes, Creative Learning Centres, Woman 2 Woman, among others. "CLT adopts Government Schools and builds a support system for the children," explains Bhagya. "Once that is complete we organize a local volunteer core group to oversee the programme. We also work closely with the school betterment committee and the parent community. CLT builds incentives to encourage school attendance and helps create an environment that is conducive to learning." The whole system had been very clearly thought out by Bhagya and one could see she has left nothing to chance. "Every programme at CLT is based on a dream or a vision," she says with a happy smile.

Intel Computer had sponsored an Intel Computer Club House which was a hive of activity when we visited, with all the little ones from the surrounding schools having hands on experience on state-of-the-art computers. It was an astonishing sight to see so many under-privileged children using professional software to create computer based projects inspired by their own ideas. "This is a community of young people, mentors and staff using technology as tools for learning," explained Bhagya. Superb! we thought, we'd love to be part of this kind of 'learning experience' ourselves !

"Our approach to learning is the Tree House Model, where we make education fun. This is done very simply by a change in the overall approach and we take learning outside of textbooks and delete the ponderous label --- "school". The Tree House Model of learning

is a fine example of integrated learning. This method initiates a 'chain of learning' wherein all fields of knowledge are linked to one another harmoniously." Wish our regular schools would think on these lines we felt!

Bhagya has an interesting Woman 2 Woman programme too wherein she realises that in order to bring any change in the community, women are the most effective agents of change. By this activity she empowers women with information and training on early childhood care which is vital for "the holistic development of the community," she feels. Parenting skills and values are imparted to women bringing awareness about parenting children of all ages, the family and thereby the community. This aims to make women self reliant to run their families more effectively.

In between talking to us and explaining the concept of the project we notice the furniture in the place has been ingeniously made of pine crates. "All gifted to us and we had an artistic volunteer design and guide the carpenter quite effectively," she says. The land is on a 30 year lease from the government and the place is run with 5% employees and 95% volunteers. "We have asked the Karnataka Government for help as well," she reveals.

As we make our way out we can see a room full of children watching with animated expressions a famous street play actor enacting the role of a beggar all in mime and encouraging the children to imitate him. There is a shine in Bhagya's eyes for soon the fruits of her efforts will be borne out once the beautiful open air building is inaugurated. Along with a group of trustees who are alumnus of IIT's and who live in the US, CLT has grown from a seed in her mind in 1997 to a flower in 2003.

" It's not just the students who are excited by this project but the teachers of these government school too are excited by the whole process," says Bhagya waving us goodbye as we leave. One thought crossed our minds as the car pulled away-- we fervently hoped she carries her dream into the future, for the good of our country and the underprivileged at large.

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