



# Bangla Hope

From Bangla Hope to You

Special Edition

June 2007

~We think you'll enjoy the following observations and thoughts from Richard Bernhardt, a sponsor who traveled to Bangladesh for the first time a few weeks ago.~

## *Joy in the Children's Faces*



### **– An Unexpected Trip through Bangladesh by Richard Bernhardt**

*“Then the little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”*

Matthew 19:13-16.

I recently returned from Bangladesh, a far away trip I never really anticipated making. I didn't know about Bangladesh nor had I met the Waids. I didn't know Bangla Hope, not really. All I did know was that this organization's heart was into supporting children. On a phone call request from Dave Waid, I made the trip and the experience was life changing.

Going to Bangladesh is not like any other trip. It's not a tourist destination. Travel agents don't know where it's located. The most common reaction I got prior to going was, "You're going where?" In my entire stay, I saw one other Westerner other than the five in our group. Here are some snippets of my experience and why I went, and truthfully, why I'll go again. It's about the children, the joy in their faces, and the real difference Bangla Hope makes for many young lives.

About six-months ago, I began to get to know Dave Waid, co-founder of BCSSA/Bangla Hope. He and his wife, Beverly, founded and have guided this amazing venture for nearly fourteen years. My first encounter with Bangladesh child sponsorship came when my wife returned home from church and announced, "We now have a daughter." This being long before the birth of my son Cory, I knew there had to be a good explanation for this revelation. "We're sponsoring an orphan child to live and go to school in Bangladesh. You would be amazed what these people are doing with very little."

Truth be told, I wasn't sure what my wife was thinking. Bangladesh? A child we've never seen? How would this work? We began getting pictures and letters; and over the years were able to watch the progress of "our child." What a little offering does is incredible. I've always read about sponsorship programs and what kid hasn't sponsored UNICEF coins for children? But do you ever have the opportunity to truly see the results. I did, first hand.

Preparations just to get to Bangladesh were intense and miraculous. The eighteen days from the decision to go and departure filled with negotiations to renew my passport—though it didn't expire until four months after my expected return, the laws of Bangladesh required it be valid six months after my return. There were seemingly unending phone calls to the Bangladesh embassy in Washington D. C. regarding the necessary visa and to the travel agent who successfully changed my flight three times. The travel immunizations and medications were acquired, the two 65-pound duffel bags of things for the orphans were packed, my personal belongings filled my carryon, and I was ready—or so I thought.

As I reviewed my travel itinerary the evening before I was to leave, I discovered that with all the changes in my ticket, the travel agent had forgotten to adjust the San Jose to Los Angeles leg of the trip to the correct day. I called her immediately. She checked seat availability. All flights were full. A thousand thoughts raced through my mind, but while we were still on the phone, a seat became available and she grabbed it.

Thirty-one hours of travel left me exhausted, but early the next morning I heard children, lots of them—some crying, some screaming like young kids do, others laughing and playing. I went out on the balcony and saw a throng of children playing and laughing. They had never seen me before. I grabbed my digital camera and soon became a source of curiosity, and to some, fear. Their reserve turned to play when I took a few pictures and turned the camera so they could see themselves in the LCD display on the back. Now everyone wanted a picture taken. Oh, and by the way, they (all of them) wanted to be picked up at the same time. Have you ever tried taking pictures while holding five or more kids at once? Next they wanted to do the picture taking. As I stood in the sea of adorable children, I felt a unique joy. It made immediate sense why I came to this place. Every child was blessed to be there. Their stories are not pretty. For them to be at Bangla Hope is the realization of living versus not. It's the transformation from a horrific life or none at all to a great loving family.

Dave made sure we were going to touch and see and interact with all of the important entities related to Bangla Hope's mission. We must see the village feeding schools, all twelve of them throughout the country, the sponsored mission schools, and the Seventh-day Adventist Union leaders and discuss our common mission in the children. We must meet with government officials, community leaders, and everyone who can make a difference to Bangla Hope. The first full day, we traveled more than a hundred miles south. We took every form of transportation from truck to large ferry, small boat to rickshaw, peddle-driven flatbed to foot.

What an accomplishment the village schools are. Built from the ground up by Bangla Hope, these schools provide fundamental education in a clean and friendly environment with qualified teachers and curriculum. The enrolled children meet in new school buildings and are provided a well-balanced, locally-derived meal prepared and cooked on premises. For many of these kids, this is the only real meal they get in the day. These kids are really learning, and getting the nutrition they need to learn. The model is replicable and it works. So far in just two years, Bangla Hope has built and established twelve village feeding schools that serve hundreds of children. Again, it's easy for me to see why I came.

Bangla Hope is one of the paramount contributors for orphans, school children, and health concerns in Bangladesh from sponsors outside the country. It is a country with many profound needs. It is a young country, just learning how to be a country. Founded in 1971 Bangladesh became an independent nation—it was formerly East Pakistan and prior to that ruled by the British. With approximately 160 million people in a space as small as one relatively small state in the United States and isolated from much of the rest of the world, Bangladesh has much poverty and little economic growth. There is however great hope and to some degree growth. Unfortunately, there remain a large number of children whose basic needs are not met. They are not all orphans. Some come from poor families, broken homes, or are abandoned by their family. These children need help and they are not well addressed because of their sheer number and relative status and priority locally.

I walked in unsure of what to expect in this far away nation. I return with an understanding that kids are kids everywhere. They yearn for attention, love to smile, enjoy learning, and deserve to have the same basic needs met that any of us crave. You cannot help but understand the reason for this mission when you stand there among the children. I would go back and my support has grown. I want to see this organization not only continue, but thrive. Its success gives a real chance at life for so many children. While Bangladesh, as a country, has an uncertain political future, it is clearly a country with exceptional needs, large poverty, and a desire to grow. The children stand out and their lives go on. What is done over there to help them is a blessing and joy to watch. They are, after all, kids like ours.

Five years ago, when my wife was pregnant with our son, we became transfixed on the notion that we had the honor of not only bringing a life into the world, but also giving him a name. We viewed it as a monumental responsibility and a tremendous honor. As I walked into breakfast one morning in Dhaka, Beverly and Lena announced we would be getting a new seven-month-old baby. The formalities were being worked out, but this wonderful child would become part of the family this week.

I rapidly asked Beverly, "How do you name a child here?" She replied that they often do not have names or bring a Bengali name, but those that do not have a name, we name. She said, perhaps something Biblical. I suggested "Timothy." I'm not entirely sure what provoked that name, but I liked it and it seemed to fit. Beverly looked at me and said, "Richard, you've just named the baby." Welcome home, Timothy.

### **One Last Story . . . But Which One?**

Many flash through my mind. The memories are numerous. I met our sponsored daughter who has been part of our family for over a decade. After the initial unease vanished, she was tearful and happy. She took my hand and led me all around. The principal's son translated, and I learned of her aspirations and what makes her happy.

My last day in Dhaka had a couple of surprises—dental work and a riot. To my way of thinking, I'm not sure which would be considered worse. Actually, they both turned out very well. My strong aversion to dentists was replaced by a very comfortable feeling as Dr. Lorna gently and carefully treated me. The riot outside the receiving center showed how quickly trouble can surface, but the quick response of the Rapid Action Battalion (similar to a SWAT team in the US) left no question in my mind that they meant business in taking care of problems and keeping us safe.

The six hundred miles traveled on the roads of Bangladesh in two short weeks were memorable, but I think I might like to just forget some of those memories.

I think I'll go with the lollipop story. The day I was to leave Dhaka and return home, I recalled that my wife had sent some Tootsie Pop lollipops with me for the children. The two big bags of suckers were still in my luggage awaiting distribution to the 51 orphans downstairs. I'd almost forgotten about the treats. I went downstairs and spoke with Lena, the headmistress for the orphans and she told me I could bring them down and give them out myself. I ran up to my room, grabbed the lollipops, and returned to a sea of bright-eyed children. They had never seen a lollipop, or for that matter, candy.

I started to open the bags and Lena told the children to "line up"—the line lasted about thirty seconds, but soon changed to a sea of faces, hands, and big smiles. Everyone wanted one of those mysterious things. I couldn't pass the treats out fast enough, though, as eager as the children were, they remained very well behaved, even until the last lollipop was in a child's hand. As I watched them enjoy their treat, I smiled with satisfaction. But then it seemed like every child surrounded me, lifting his or her sucker up to me as if I should lick each one.

Lena gathered them and they began singing a concert for me. They sang, "Twinkle Twinkle" and a chorus of others. They speak Bengali, the native language of Bangladesh, but they can sing in English. It was priceless and had me near tears. Now we had fifty-one orphan children full of sugar and very happy. Life was good.

### **What's Next?**

Life continues in Bangladesh and now, from my new perspective, I can see how much Bangla Hope really does put "hope" into the lives of children. It touches so many lives, not just those in the schools, or the orphanages, or the village feeding schools, or the dental clinic, or the handicrafts. It touches this nation and all who come in contact with Bangla Hope's work because they can see it in the children's eyes.

As an outsider looking in, I see nothing but good. It is often the skeptic who says, "What little they have, what good could they do?" Bangla Hope takes whatever is provided and amplifies it. It's amazing they can do so much with so little. Please join me in continuing to support this organization. It gets into your heart and affects so many lives. It may be cliché, but a little goes a long way where it's needed.

### **Why Sponsor a Child in Bangladesh through BCSSA/Bangla Hope?**

So much comes of this sponsorship that is real, tangible, and affects children's lives. This organization, Bangla Hope, stands for the mission of providing sustenance, education, life essentials, and a family environment for the children. So it is clear, a little does so much in this place.

*"He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'" - Mark 9:36-47.* Children in Bangladesh, children in America, children in Europe, Africa, Asia, South America, and everywhere are the children of God. A little support goes a very long way.