



Shanti Playground Project

When looking to help children in other countries, a special place to “just be kids,” is often overlooked

FOUR YEARS AGO, I had the life changing opportunity to volunteer for 2 months at an orphanage and shelter, Operation Shanti, located in Mysore, India. I was deeply affected by the spirit and resilience of the children there, especially knowing some of the extreme trials and traumas many had experienced. Operation Shanti is a non-profit founded in San Francisco, CA

founded by a woman who went to Mysore to practice Ashtanga yoga ten years ago. While there she realized her true purpose: helping the local children, some as young as three, who were working the streets with nowhere to live.

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When asked the story behind Shanti, she explains: "whatever their potential, they should have the chance to realize it and not waste life, even if that might be becoming a cook or a house cleaner or driver, at least they should get a solid education and be exposed to as many things as they can - not just the street or the slum life but art, music, sports, whatever. and of course to achieve their potential, they need the basics - good food, good health - so they can perform to their abilities." With much support, Shanti has grown into a fully functioning shelter where the children receive food, a home, medical aid, and have the opportunity to attend nearby schools.

I left India feeling inspired and excited to open our preschool, StarSeeds, but also knew deep inside that I wanted to give back to this special group of kids at Shanti. I had a vision of connecting San Francisco kids with the kids in India to begin fostering a sense of global citizenship at an early age, and instilling the idea of giving to those who have less.

So, how to give back to these kids? Working with children for a living, I believe they have one "job", TO PLAY. I thought the best thing to do was help them build a playground! With this idea the StarSeeds Shanti Playground project was born.

I, along with my boyfriend Baxter and my business partner Trisha, started the playground project this past January. The goal was to raise funds to build a playground as well as have our kids and the kids at Shanti connect by helping "design" the playground together. Then we would go to India, build the playground with all local resources, and start a photography program with the kids that could run indefinitely after we left. We love photography and dreamed of getting cameras in the hands of the kids. With the help of our family, friends, and StarSeeds community, we were able to raise the funds to build the playground and start a photography program for them.



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I returned to India two weeks ago with my boyfriend, Baxter Smith, a filmmaker, photographer, and avid fan of Hipstamatic, the perfect tool to document the project.

We are constantly in awe of India. It is such an intense place, filled with both extreme beauty and deep struggles.

The most inspiring thing that we have experienced so far is the children at Operation Shanti. Their joy for life is infectious. Their attitudes mirror our experience with much of India. Time after time we were shown a unique kindness and love by the Indian people.

The construction for the StarSeeds Shanti Playground Project has begun! We are hoping that the monsoon gods continue to show us their mercy.

The photography program is becoming so much more amazing than we could have imagined. The kids have picked it up so quickly and have been taking endless photos. Most importantly, they are having so much fun and LOVE taking pictures. We have a hard time getting the cameras back from them at the end of the day, "one more, one more" is the anthem amongst the Shanti kids. — *Kendra Pinkerton*



ONLINE





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