

Meet Equal Health Volunteer - Gillian

An Occupational Therapist's Experiences in West Bengal

I am a paediatric occupational therapist in private practice in Perth. I first came to be involved with Equal Health in August 2003 when I walked into Vision West to update my glasses prescription and Paul Clarke asked me if I would like to go to India as a volunteer. The words were like music to my ears and it took me all of 10 seconds to say yes! My first trip was in February 2004 as a member of the first team to visit Anandaniketan - Society for Mental Health Care in Katwa, West Bengal. It was also the first time an Equal Health team included allied health professionals.



The most significant experience I had on that first trip was meeting Manik, a 9 year old boy with cerebral palsy who had been living at Anandaniketan for 6 years and spent most of that time lying in bed. While at Anandaniketan I was able to work with Manik everyday and show his carers that he could actually sit independently for short periods, finger feed him self,



reach and manipulate objects, smile and laugh; things his carers did not know he could do! It was this experience with Manik that showed me just how much occupational therapists, physiotherapists and speech pathologists could do at Anandaniketan. Manik sadly died before I was able to return the following year, but his memory lives on in the name Maniker Ghar (Manik's Room), given to a Play/Recreation Room that was established at Anandaniketan the following year with the support of Equal Health.

Another significant event that came out of the first visit to Anandaniketan was a partnership between Anandaniketan and Curtin University. In October 2005 a group of twelve 4th year occupational therapy (OT) students spent 4 weeks working at Anandaniketan as part of their final clinical placement. They were able to continue the therapy programmes started by the Equal Health therapists and developed programmes of their own, many of which are still running today. The partnership between Anandaniketan and Curtin University has gone from strength to strength with two groups of occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech



pathology and more recently pharmacy students now visiting Anandaniketan each year! The collaboration between Anandaniketan, Equal Health and Curtin University has made it possible for the residents at Anandaniketan to receive the therapy services and support that they would not otherwise have access to and the staff and carers receive the training and support they need to better meet the therapeutic needs of the residents.

Since 2004 I have returned to Anandaniketan every year with my trip in February 2009 being my 8th! I have also been the Allied Health and Anandaniketan coordinator on the Equal Health Committee of Management since 2004 which has given me even more opportunity to be involved and contribute to the invaluable work that Equal Health does in India. It is probably obvious to you by now that Anandaniketan, Equal Health and India occupy a very special place in my life! I have experienced and learned so much and I have had the privilege of meeting and working with compassionate and very talented allied health, medical, dental and optical professionals from throughout Australia, as well as supervising two groups of very talented Curtin University students at Anandaniketan. Equal Health's overarching goal for Anandaniketan is to enhance the quality of life and independent functioning of each resident by supporting and training the carers and staff, providing Anandaniketan with much needed resources and facilities and providing health and therapy services that Anandaniketan can not afford to provide. Much has been done at Anandaniketan by those who have given of their time, skills and hearts and much still needs to be done, but most of us also know that despite the challenges that are inherent in the work that we do, the rewards far outweigh the challenges!!

Anandaniketan was established in 1988 and is a not for profit organisation that provides residential care to 350 children, adolescents and adults. The residents mostly have intellectual and/or physical disabilities, and mental illness and many of the residents are orphans. Anandaniketan also has a school that provides schooling for children with special needs, a cancer detection and management centre and a training institute offering diploma and degree studies in intellectual disability. Anandaniketan is situated 4-5 kilometres outside the village of Katwa in West Bengal.



Occupational Therapist Volunteer - Gillian

A life changing appointment