

Fairport teen changing the world, one life at a time



Natascha

Natascha Yogachandra is a normal teenager, in many ways. She likes to shop in the mall. She listens to music on her iPod. She enjoys "girl talk" with her friends. But hers is hardly the life of a typical 14-year-old from Fairport.

She and her parents, Nat and Debbie, treat the world as their family and live accordingly.

When she was 7, Natascha decided to collect books for children in poor countries who had none. Project Book Angel was launched with help from a supplier who donated boxes. That's how Natascha learned that service is not as complicated as people say it is when we are looking for excuses for our inaction.

Two years ago, she persuaded Nat and Debbie to take her to Sri Lanka (Nat's native country) to help with tsunami relief. Later that year, they rented out their Fairport



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home and moved to Pune, India, to start a new life of service.

"I'm so glad we did go (to India)," Natascha told me while she and her parents were making their annual summer home visit. "You feel so good when you can help even one kid."

The Yogachandras started a foundation — Hope is Life — which they will deliberately keep small. They are not interested in raising large sums of money, so much as they are interested in changing lives, one at a time, with a hands-on presence. Their donors are

mainly friends and friends of friends who have heard of the foundation — and Nat keeps them informed on every project they begin.

"We never give money," he says. "We find out what people need and then we get that for them. Money just disappears."

They have started small libraries in several villages, set up day care centers, and bought sewing machines to help girls in an orphanage learn a trade.

Their most recent project was in Calcutta, where they worked with the All Bengal Women's Union — a volunteer association that houses runaway girls. Helping young girls is Natascha's top priority; without an education, girls are at risk of being sold into the sex trade, or even being enslaved by husbands.

They met 10 girls, ages 16 to 22, and "we signed a contract to send them to school for

five years," says Nat. "It only costs \$300 per year," but that is money they do not have. "Even simple things and a very small amount of money can make a huge difference," Natascha says.

Natascha has finished the ninth grade at the Riverdale International School in Pune. And the next stop is Thailand. They've left their small projects in India in the hands of others for now and will start over again. "We can go anywhere in the world and find a way to help," Natascha says. The venue will change, but the mission will be the same — help girls get the education that can change their lives.

"These girls are told that after eighth grade, they'll work in the fields with their families," Natascha says. "But they have big dreams. They want to be nurses or lawyers, or teachers."

They'll find a home before

To help out

Make checks payable to Hope is Life Foundation and send them to P.O. Box 261, Fairport, NY 14450. Go to www.hopeislife.org.

the end of summer. Nat, a Kodak retiree, will use his network of contacts through Kodak, the Rotary and the Baha'i community to relocate.

In her young life, Natascha has seen poverty and suffering her friends can't imagine. But she does not get discouraged. "I see things I can do, and I do them," she says.

They travel light, stay close, keep focused on what matters, and appreciate the beauty all around. "The sunsets in India are incredible," Natascha says. "We'd go lie on a big hill at night after dinner and watch the sky and see so many stars."

It's a simple philosophy. And a beautiful life. □



N. Yogachandra



D. Yogachandra

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