

A NEW EDUCATION CENTRE IN TAMIL NADU – DREAM COMES TRUE FOR SYLVIA WRIGHT TRUST

Tony Hartigan



About three million people live in the poor district of Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu, South India. Among them are many children with profound disabilities including cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, Downs Syndrome, autism and other mental and physical difficulties.

There is very little provision and care for these children in the district. Most children suffer, make little progress and are seen as a great burden on their families. Some are left at home alone and have to be restrained while their parents go out to work – if they can find it.

In 1982 Sylvia Wright, a Catholic nurse, left her home, Holy Name Parish and friends in Leeds as well as her Senior Lecturer post at Leeds Polytechnic – now Beckett University – to devote her life to those less fortunate than herself. Now aged 79, she is still working seven days a week bringing hope, love and care to sick and disabled people living in poverty in Tiruvannamalai.

In the last 35 years she has established a charity hospital with 160 beds, a boarding school for over 200 profoundly deaf children, a nursing college with 80 student nurses and two day centres offering care for 80 severely disabled children.

They are brought to the day centres each day from outlying villages in a special bus provided by Yorkshire supporters. Some of the children need wheelchairs and physical assistance.

They have received love and care in two borrowed and dilapidated premises: the children develop and make some progress and the parents are given advice and some daily respite.

However, the old buildings and facilities have inadequate toilets, no outside play areas or much needed physiotherapy equipment.

Sylvia Wright's work is supported by the Sylvia Wright Trust, a small registered charity based in Leeds. In 2016 it decided to build a new Integrated Education & Therapy Centre.

Together with enhanced therapies and staffing, this will transform the lives of the children and their parents. Construction started in January 2016 and will be completed next month.

It is next to Sylvia Wright's Rangammal School for Deaf Children.

The Centre will accommodate 100 children, expanding the present capacity, and has been designed to provide space, light, colour and a stimulating environment.

It will be surrounded by gardens and include a playground with toys, hammocks and swings. There will be nine classrooms (some with sensory, music and art facilities) and also a physiotherapy room. Each classroom will have a toilet and shower. There will be a small therapy pool – a wonderful facility for disabled children. The Centre will also be offered as an outpatients' clinic and a centre of excellence in the district.

The new Centre has been championed by Sylvia Wright and Lee Morgan from San Francisco. Lee is a Canadian trained Osteopathic, Feldenkrais practitioner and movement therapist.

She has been visiting Sylvia Wright in India for more than a decade to work with children with special needs including those in the present day centres. She has also raised money for the new building in the USA and India.

Her short and moving video about the project can be viewed on YouTube – "Sylvia Wright A Ray of Hope" or you can find it on the Trust's website: www.sylviawright.org

Lee has also helped to design the curriculum and deliver special staff training in neuro-development



therapy. The aim is to develop each child as much as is possible. The approach will include music, speech, movement, art, physical therapies, hydrotherapy and an emphasis on sensory feedback.

The curriculum will encourage sensory-motor development which is essential for the organization of brain-body connections underlying learning. The children will be encouraged to explore and discover themselves and their environment.

Sylvia Wright acknowledges that India is going through a process of accelerated change but that the weaker are often left behind.

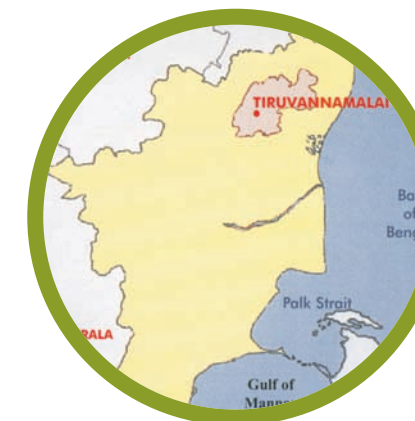
"These children come from very deprived backgrounds and have no other opportunity to develop and learn. They are excited about moving into their new Centre. We hope that this will be before Easter," she says.

While her work is going from strength to strength, she has also expressed her gratitude to "all the talented and dedicated people who are visiting and sharing their expertise, motivating existing Indian staff to develop their skills and to realise the deep joy that can come from serving others."

The Trust has identified some qualified physiotherapists and hydrotherapists in the UK who have generously volunteered to help establish good practice in the Centre from the start. Some have also visited the homes of the children to assess their individual needs. More volunteers are being sought.

Tony Allinson, Chairman of the Trust, says: "This new Centre will provide a wonderful service to the children and their families in the absence of any other worthwhile provision for their care,

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development, dignity and happiness. It is a dream coming true."

The average UK house price in January 2017 was £205,240. Remarkably, the new Centre for 100 disabled children in Tiruvannamalai is costing about the same amount.

Most of the funding for the design and construction has so far been secured by the Sylvia Wright Trust, Rotary and donors in the USA, and the staff in all Sylvia's projects in India are contributing one per cent of their salaries.

However, due to rising costs and to the drop in the value of the pound, the Trust needs to raise another £50,000 to finish landscaping and to provide the new furniture and equipment necessary to meet

the special needs of the children.

The running costs of the old centres have always been largely funded by the Trust but a further £3,000 per month is needed for the new Centre to secure more highly-trained teachers and therapists and to pay the extra running costs.

Care and education is provided free to all children whose families cannot afford to contribute.

How can you help us in this vital work?

- Make a single or a regular donation by cheque or bank transfer to The Sylvia Wright Trust. Barclays Bank, sort code: 20-48-46. Account no: 8071379.
- You can if you wish specify the building fund, the equipment fund or the monthly running fund
- You can sponsor one of the 100 children for any amount or period you choose.
- You can fund any number of days care each month at a cost of £1 per day per child.

It will cost about £30 per month for each child's care, education and therapy at the Centre. At £1 per child per day this is astonishing value.

The Trust wishes to thank you in advance for any help you are able to give. All donations, big or small, make a difference to these children's lives and are gratefully received and acknowledged – in due course by the children themselves.

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