

## BENCHES FOR BINDUS

- Florence Bazhaw



(A success story on how Teamwork among an American Foundation, Tamil Nadu Foundation and Philadelphia community is having an impact on a school in Bommidi, Tamil Nadu)

"God, you have never failed me before, but since I have not been able to raise the money, and I did give my word, I will put it on a credit card." These words were spoken by a single woman of limited means in the United States who had made a commitment to fund a project in India to get some girls who dreamed of sitting in a classroom on "benches" and off the floor. Three thousand dollars was a lot of money for Sundari (Viswanathan) to try to raise, especially since she was putting her son through college. She had done her best and failed. But Sundari did not let failure be an excuse to break her commitment.

Virtually simultaneous to this prayer of Sundari, within moments, Florence made a phone call to Sundari letting her know that the GERTRUDE S. LANE FOUNDATION had agreed to cover the cost of the desks. This Foundation is committed to a better world for our children. Florence had secured the donation a week ago, and had been meaning to let Sundari know. Suddenly that morning, just moments after Sundari's decision to follow through on the desk commitment, she heard an "inaudible" voice that said, "Call Sundari and tell her about the money NOW."

Sundari soon realized that collecting funds was like just winning half the battle. Two U.S. based Indian non-profit organizations working in Tamil Nadu promised to buy and deliver quality benches as per the contract. Months passed and nothing happened to the promises they made. Finally, Sundari approached Tamil Nadu Foundation (TNF) that has 32 years of track record in serving Tamil Nadu and 30 paid employees to monitor projects funded from the U.S. TNF chapter in Chennai came to the project's rescue and made it a success through excellent execution and follow-up audit on funds spent.

Following is the result of Sundari's commitment and those who have been inspired by it:

- The students of the highest grade (10th) are all sitting on benches.
- The poor people of the village are now donating from their own limited funds so that students who had never received any reward for academic excellence are now being awarded scholarships annually.
- The villagers donated money so that there is now a toilet for the girls to use at school (they no longer have to "hold it" till they get home.)
- Eleventh and twelfth grade classrooms have been built as a result of further donations by the village.
- Additional funds have been donated towards the maintenance of the school. A five-year-old boy forewent birthday presents and asked for donations to be given toward the benches.
- The government has approved to build a science lab for US \$24,000 (however, the village must purchase the land necessary for this.)
- The community is learning to participate in the well being of the school and the education of the girls and the future of their people.
- Plans are being made toward the development of a sustainable project, whereby proceeds from the project could become a perpetual source of funding for the school, a library and a community center. The long range plan is to eliminate the need for continuing donations and to create a sustainable, independent educational system.

This October 1, 2006, the GERTRUDE S. LANE FOUNDATION has arranged a "trek" at Ridley Creek State Park to fund the continuing needs of the school. This includes the land for the expansion of the schools, and additional desks to get these girls off the floor. These girl children have been neglected and are thrilled that someone cares about how painful it is to sit on a floor for 6 to 8 hours a day with no back support.

The challenge of purchasing the land for the lab and other needs of the school is currently beyond the ability of the poor villagers. However, they are asking you, the reader, to join them. We need your support! As the poor villagers have donated from their limited means, they are asking you to contribute from your abundance. Please join us on our trek to help the villagers achieve their goal. Call THE GERTRUDE S. LANE FOUNDATION at 610-527-3000 for details or go to the web site: [www.Gertrudeslanefoundation.org](http://www.Gertrudeslanefoundation.org).

**(Sundari Viswanathan is a very active member of TAGDV, Vice President of the Philadelphia Chapter of Tamil Nadu Foundation and a well-known social worker. She can be reached at (610) 734-1666, [sundari84@yahoo.com](mailto:sundari84@yahoo.com) Florence Bazhaw is an advisor to Gertrude S. Lane Foundation).**