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# The Seattle University Calcutta Project 1985 - 2011

By Todd Waller

**T**he late Fr. Richard Sherburne, S.J., and former Seattle University psychology professor Neil Young started sending students to work with Mother Teresa in Kolkata (Calcutta) in an era when Global Education projects operated outside of the realm of risk managers. The Seattle University administration managed to offer support from the sidelines allowing the student-run initiative to operate for 26 years sending 200+ students to work with the Missionaries of Charity. The program was a magnificent example of

Jesuit education in action in the spirit of Ignatius and his early fellow Jesuit brothers embarking into the unknown.

Below are a few perspectives from former participants as they reflect back on their work in Calcutta.

### **Marina Groenewald (1998)**

There is no reason why you have (a) to understand everything right now or (b) make firm decisions about your life based on your experience because Calcutta will inform your experience whether you know it or not, whether you want it to or not.

### **Erica Parys Siegmund (1998)**

I needed to be exposed to something bigger than me, and while I felt a calling to go and participate in this, I had to do it blindly without any idea of what the outcome would be and what I might gain. I would live in the answers, not the questions, and live into the answers and the answers I think have come back to me in a passion for social justice and a passion for living.

### **John King (1989)**

To take note of their suffering and to say "Hey, well this matters, this matters to me, this should matter to us all." The sense of turning a blind eye to the needs of others is really no longer an option. And to really feel that as opposed to just say it, and say "okay well, if I feel it – if it's really going happen" – it's got to be integrated into, kind of, my own lived experience.

### **Matt White (1995)**

I wasn't Ignatius of Loyola or Siddhartha having this prolific bachelorhood and then having a huge conversion, nothing like that at all. I probably have had a fairly consistent personality before and after India. But I really was struck by how hard it was to live out some of the ideals I was shown face to



Marcus Nash (1989) walking down a busy New Market street.

face in India, like seeing Mother Teresa at work, seeing the sisters at work, seeing the poor people on the street still smiling through their day with barely anything to their name whatsoever, and then I was going back to this affluent American society and thinking, "How do I incorporate these lessons in my life in any way? Is that even possible?"

### **Molly McCarthy (1998)**

I came home and what I did was I gave Father Sundborg [Seattle University president] a lot of hell at Seattle U. for my last two years there. We particularly focused on issues like sweatshops, where all Seattle U brands of clothing were made. I came home not afraid to email the president, demand a meeting every week, and say, "Here is something I can do from here to help people who are in need." I mean it's not the president's fault, but it is Seattle U's fault. I wouldn't have been a rabble-rouser if I hadn't have gone to Calcutta.

### **Marina Groenewald (1998):**

What Calcutta really taught me is that life is the most important, life is the most valuable in the moments of contradiction. I think like that anyway. But again, seeing it over and over and over again, being stretched to the point where you think nothing makes sense and then something, like, sitting on the street and watching the mist come in, the fog and the pollution settle in, there is just this, I guess I call it the beautiful imperfection of life.

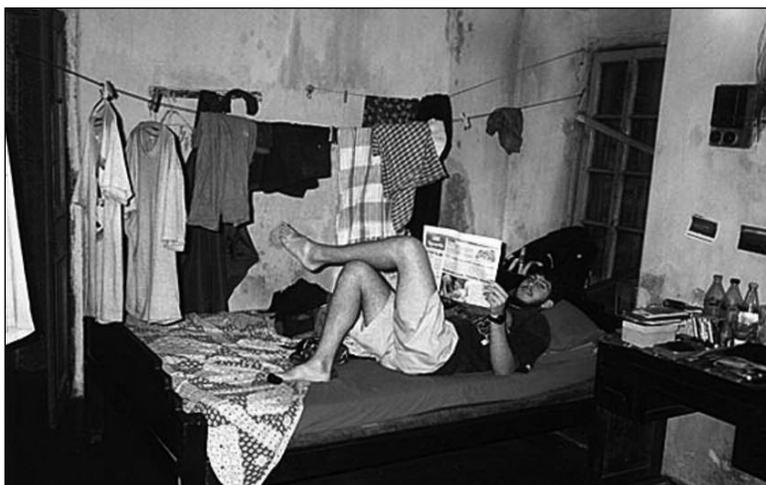
### **Precious Butiu (1999)**

It is a hard balance: it is important to give but it is also important to receive. It's also important to give to yourself and I think that is a lesson that I am trying to learn; striving to be compassionate, striving to be generous with others to helping others, but also receiving help from others and also taking the time to take care of my own self.

The responses are individual but share the message: the experience was powerful!



Seattle University student, Lynne Herink, with Mother Teresa, Calcutta 1997



1995 volunteer, Steve, relaxing in his Kolkata apartment.



A child gathering ashes for sale.

All photos courtesy of Seattle University.