

On the Path to Sahaya International

by Koen Van Rompay

“Can I really make a difference in the life of an und



Students at the Jawahar Matriculation School smile for the camera on Sports Day. Jawahar Matriculation School is located in Andhra Pradesh, India. Sahaya International and Sahaya's partner organization, READ India.

erprivileged child?”



All photos provided by Koen Van Rompay

madam, Tamil Nadu, India. It receives funds from Sahaya

That’s the question that stuck in my mind in 1997. As a veterinarian and HIV researcher at UC Davis, I was traveling to the city of Chennai in India, having been invited to present my research findings at a regional AIDS conference. Outside of the conference halls, I was shocked to witness the severe poverty and suffering of many people. What especially broke my heart was seeing so many innocent children who lacked the basic level of comfort, who were given little respect and very few chances in life, and who struggled to survive on the streets. It evoked many emotions that were hard to deal with. Thoughts of realization were racing through my mind—they made me realize how spoiled I was, living in Davis, California.

I became frustrated with my inability to find a solution, because I am not a social worker. I am not a politician. I am just a lab researcher who had no experience in this whatsoever. But I couldn’t just trust that others will solve it, because even though there are so many specialists all over the world, poverty was clearly rampant here. I felt I could not close my eyes. I had to do something. I couldn’t change the world, but maybe I could help a child. But giving some money or some food to a begging child would only change a day in their life. If I wanted to change the life of one child on longer terms, how would I go about it? If I’d donate to a large organization, how would I know the money would get here? How would I know the child truly would get a better future?

Fortunately, at the same conference, I befriended a social worker, Mr. Selvam, who had just started a small grassroots organization in a remote rural area. I became intrigued by his dedication to helping others with whatever little means were available, even if it meant sacrificing oneself. I noticed that Mr. Selvam himself was malnourished and poor, but had a big heart. This inspired me! I decided to get involved, in a small way, by selling embroidered cards that women in his village were making to raise some much-needed funds. I remember I was happy to have raised my first \$20 here in Davis.



Children in the rural village of Kien Giang, Vietnam are photographed with the educational supplies Sahaya donated. Sahaya and the local Buu Son Monastery collaborate to provide social services to the rural community in the form of medication, food, and education.

My interest was sparked, and within one year, I raised \$1,000 by selling cards. That may not sound like a lot, but in a country like India, where many adults only earn \$1 or \$2 per day, it makes a difference. As my involvement grew, I decided to start a nonprofit organization in Davis, and named it Sahaya International (www.sahaya.org). Sahaya means “help” in Sanskrit. As we’re 100% volunteer-run, this means that as I still have my day job, I spend nearly every evening or weekend working on it.

Over the years, we expanded our programs, including sponsorship programs for orphans and HIV-infected children. Each year, we organize a walk in Davis, first called “Hope Walks”, but now named “Sahaya Walks”, to raise funds for HIV-infected children. Each year, we’ve been fortunate to have Davis High School students participating, including the Freedom from Hunger and CSF clubs.

Some late evenings, when I am looking for inspiration to reenergize me, I often think of Shanti*, one of the first girls in our program who was diagnosed as HIV-infected. I remember meeting her

the first time in 2003. “I assumed that she was ‘plain happy’ [...] the kind of happiness that we take for granted.” Selvam and I were leaving from a visit to a large HIV clinic in Chennai, when she and her mother were just arriving there, after an 8-hour bus trip from our village. Selvam knew the mother, so we halted to say a few words, and I was introduced to Shanti, a 6-year-old girl, who was standing quietly next to her mother, with gems of eyes staring at me. I was probably the first white person she had ever seen. Selvam explained me that they were both here thanks to the support of sponsors in Davis, to cover their travel expenses to reach this clinic and get proper medical care, as both of them were HIV-infected. Because in 2003 few medications were available, I was unsure about the chances of this family, but wishing for their future, and determined to do my best in my own small ways. As years went by, on my annual trips to India, I saw Shanti grow up step-wise. Thanks to the better HIV



Ranjitha (right) was part of Sahaya's orphan sponsorship program. Thanks to the support of a sponsor, not only could she finish high school, but she could complete a higher education program. Her goal was to become a teacher who worked with children with special needs. She graduated earlier this year and is now working at Sahaya's special school in Andimadam.

medicines that were becoming available, and her perseverance to travel a long distance every month to the clinic to pick up the medicines, she remained healthy. She was very special. On a few occasions, when she would see me walking through the villages, or when we would be taking all the kids on a trip to the beach, she would run toward me, grasp my hand firmly, and not let go for several minutes. Although she did not speak English, and I don't speak enough of the local language (Tamil), on such moments I felt that the warmth of her gentle hands, the smile on her face and the stars in her eyes conveyed her emotions better than words from lips could do: she was happy. I assumed that she was "plain happy", the kind of happiness that kids here in the USA feel when they go on a fun trip or receive a birthday present; the kind of happiness that we take for granted.

Not long ago, in preparation for our annual walk event here in Davis, I had asked Mr. Selvam to ask some of the kids in our program to write about their life, and what we mean to them. Shortly afterwards, I received a letter written by Shanti. It

brought tears to my eyes...

Dear friends,

In my family there were four members, until my father died when I was three. My mother goes daily for cashewnut processing work to look after our needs. My elder sister is a differently abled child.

My mother would prepare food for us and she would be fasting often due to the insufficient amount of money. The food was also not sufficient for us. If sometimes I asked my mother for some more quantity of food, she used to share her food with me. At that time I felt so depressed and when I asked my mother the reason for the problems we face in life, she used to say that I am the only soul earning money in our family and as your father is not with us, the total family is depending upon my income so I have to satisfy your need, so you better kindly adjust with this living condition. At that time I feel the absence of my father. Whenever I see my friends and neighbors family happily going along with their father to temple, cinema etc., I have a feeling that if my father was alive I would have



Shanti in 2003 (left) and in 2010 (right).

also enjoyed my life with him; my mother realized my feelings and to help me overcome sadness, she would take me to the nearby temple in the village.

At the time of Diwali festival, and other functions we won't be having new dresses to wear. Our neighbors children used to wear new dresses and burst crackers, this will make me so depressed and when I ask my mother about the new dresses, her reply will be the same that their father is earning money and he bought them new dresses, but in our family only I am earning and that itself is not sufficient for us to look after our basic needs, and we will not be going out at this time of occasions. At that time I missed my father's presence a lot. I was not even using proper notebooks for my studies. My mother used to get only one or two notebooks. I have gotten many scoldings from my school teachers and if I go and tell this to my mother, she would say "With my income alone how can I satisfy all the needs of you" and by saying these words she cried. At that moment I just console my mother by saying these words "Whenever you get money, then you purchase and give me the notebooks". The classmates of me bring different varieties of food items for lunch like poori, pongal, idly. I too like eating these types of food items but when I expressed this to my mother. She replied, "They are rich people. They can eat different foods but we are not like them. We can have only rice." The words uttered by

my mother made me sad. This was our situation.

When I received support from Sahaya, I became very happy. I received a desk, notebooks, and school uniform. And I was very happy in attending the sponsorship meeting and to see many children. I was taken on tours to temples and to the beach, and this was entirely a new experience for me I enjoyed a lot. Even I would have not enjoyed a lot with my father like this if he was alive. I am thankful for the timely help.

When I pray to God I usually have a habit of praying for all your well-being and health. We want you in our life, because without you there is no life for us. My entire family is happy now and I pray to God to give a long life for you to help many children like me to come up in their life.

Yours lovingly,
Shanti

**Name changed for confidentiality.*

Belgian-born Koen Van Rompay obtained a Ph.D in Comparative Pathology from UC Davis and became an HIV/AIDS researcher at UCD. His non-profit organization, Sahaya International (<http://www.sahaya.org/>), has been improving life in third-world countries since 1999. It supports programs in India, Kenya, Vietnam, Phillipines, and Sri Lanka.