

Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a "compassion story of the month." This is the twenty fifth. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

From Contempt to Compassion: The Seed that Germinated into Marygold Village

By Teresa Savel and Elia Gilbert

In 1995 in India, Teresa met Pulliyah, an energetic eight-year old orphan boy staying at a boarding-school hostel. The hostel was a 16' x 16' room with a cement floor. Pulliyah was sharing the hostel with 50 other boys in grades 1-10.

This school and hostel had been founded and administered by Father Guilbert, a South Indian Carmelite Priest, part of a Carmelite monastery in the Indian state of Telengana. Teresa had connected with Father Guilbert through a Kansas-based foundation for children and the aging, and had enlisted as a volunteer. She lived at the school, and worked as a kindergarten teacher and teacher trainer.

Teresa's friendship with Father Guilbert then continued over the years. On a return trip 21 years later, when Father Guilbert, now in his 70s, picked her up from the airport, Teresa asked him what had become of Pulliyah and the other children with whom she had formed close friendships during her year-long stay in 1995. She showed Father Guilbert a photograph she had of Pulliyah. Father Guilbert examined the picture, thoughtfully repeating the name, "Pulliyah" several times...It took some minutes before he recognized that Pulliyah was now the adult Monastic he knew as Father Emmanuel!

Father Emmanuel was as energetic as ever, with a hearty laugh that echoed through the corridors. Now, as two adults with a shared history that had been life-changing for both of them, they began their friendship anew.

Teresa realized that she never knew how he had become an orphan. This is what he told her:

After Pulliyah's father died, his mother raised him and his two siblings on her own. They lived in a little hut in the village of Sarapaka, the same village where the school was located. Their mother slept at night in the hut while Pulliyah and his siblings, all under the age of nine, slept outside on a cot next to the hut. One night they awoke suddenly to the sound of their mother screaming. Looking up, the children saw their hut engulfed in flames. A deranged neighbor had trapped their mother in the hut after dowsing it with kerosene and setting it afire. The horrified children managed to pull their mother out of the flames, place her charred body on a bullock cart, and wheeled her to the hospital. It was too late. She died soon afterwards.

After this horrific tragedy, Pulliyah and his siblings went to live with an elderly grandfather who found it difficult to care for them. The grandfather discovered, however, that Father Guilbert was

encouraging the villagers to send their children to the school. Although schooling was not yet a common practice in these rural areas, the grandfather approached Father Guilbert and applied. Eight year old Pulliyah was accepted into the Sarapaka boarding school, while his siblings went to live at the neighboring boarding school hostels run by the Carmelites.

In recounting this story to Teresa, Father Emmanuel openly shared the intense anger he had felt toward his mother's murderer, and how, for many years, he had harbored a deep desire to kill the perpetrator. It took years of diligent work under the patient guidance of Father Guilbert and the other Monastics for this deep-seated anger to be transformed. In the end, he was able to find forgiveness for this man, along with the deepest gratitude for his mother who, he now believes had sacrificed her life so that he could become the man he is now, a priest, a boarding school hostel administrator, and an active supporter of community efforts to address its multiple pressing human needs.

Three years later, Teresa began to consider returning to India once more, and phoned Father Emmanuel to hear his thoughts. "I would be delighted to have my friend back in India," he said, "but, what exactly would you like to do?" This question rekindled a specific hope for Teresa, one she had harbored from childhood. "I want to work with orphans," she told Father Emmanuel, inquiring whether such an opportunity existed. Father Emmanuel mentioned a defunct clinic at the nearby village of Hemanchandarapurem, which also had been founded in the 1970s by Father Guilbert and other Carmelite Monastics in an effort to cure residents of leprosy.

Teresa jumped at the possibility of renewing and expanding programmatic efforts in that village. This time Elia Gilbert, like Teresa a longtime Waldorf Early Childhood Educator, joined her. Working collaboratively with their Monastic friends, they established what has come to be known as Marygold Village (MGV). Creative and visionary efforts with active community involvement began in earnest, and the results have been extraordinary and far reaching.

Marygold Village is now an inclusive non-profit initiative, which honors the rich and diverse cultures of Southern India, and takes action in partnership with local residents and the local community of Carmelite Monastics. We focus on the primary needs of families in the region, supporting physical health and well-being through organic and biodynamic food production, clean water, play-based education for young children, educational sponsorship for school-aged children, family support services, vocational training, and care of the elderly through multigenerational community life. With a long-term goal of sustainability, each of our initiatives aims for self-sufficiency.

Marygold Village is home to families who, three generations prior, were affected with leprosy, and who now are integrating into the wider community, in spite of continued social stigma. We are currently repairing renovating buildings that will serve as boarding school hostels and volunteer headquarters.

And this initiative is now also finding a home in the Brattleboro area!

First, Brattleboro is looking forward to welcoming Father Thomas Reddy, one of the Carmelite Monastics who helped inspire the mission of Marygold Village, when he visits this month.

On Saturday, July 27th, 2-4:30pm at the Putney Community Center, our area will host a “cultural feast for the senses”, to support the Marygold Village work in India, with Father Thomas as our special guest. The afternoon will include Classical Indian dancers from Boston, traditional Indian refreshments by Dosa Kitchen of Brattleboro and Royal Spice of Keene, Bollywood dancing by the Keene India Association, henna-tattooing, up-cycled bags made by the women living at the village, and sacred art by the South Indian Carmelite cloistered nuns as donation-based gifts.

This is a not-to-be-missed event. Suggested donation: Children under 5 free, Seniors and students-\$5, Individuals-\$10, Families-\$25. Let’s enjoy this inspiring cultural event and do global good at the same time!

Second, Marygold Village is excited to be partnering with Brattleboro as one of its sister communities. Please come to the big event on July 27th and, to learn more, contact us at marygoldvillage@gmail.com and follow us on Facebook and Instagram.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, PO Box 50, Marlboro, VT 05344. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.