



How a Rotary member is addressing educational inequality on her home turf

Deepa Willingham established a learning center in poverty stricken Piyali, India to provide a better future for girls

by Jeff Ruby

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Oasis. Everybody who visits the PACE Learning Center, an all-girls school near Kolkata, India, uses the same word: oasis. They take a long look at the campus's pristine green lawns and the swaying palm trees. They contemplate the serene meditation center, the laughter-filled playground, and the outdoor complex full of girls in yellow polo shirts bending this way and that in yoga class. That's when the questions begin: Where did this gleaming, environmentally sustainable Shangri-La come from? Who made it happen? And why here, in the rural village of Piyali Junction in West Bengal, where much of the population is illiterate and extreme poverty abounds?

Today, the girls swarm around a woman with a deep, intense smile and dark hair shot through with shades of gray and white. The older kids look up at her adoringly, as do the smaller ones, though they don't really know who she is yet. They only understand by the way the teachers are treating her that she must be someone important. All of them call her Dida, which means "Grandmother," and the hugs and kisses never seem to end. "Every time I come, they're all over me," says Dida. "There is not enough cheek space."

Dida is Deepa Biswas Willingham, and her deliberate manner and the proud look in her eyes suggest she might have something to do with this oasis. Sylvia Whitlock, a friend of Willingham and of the school, dispels any doubt. "Deepa is a selfless woman," says Whitlock, a retired educational administrator who is herself rather extraordinary — she was the first woman to serve as president of a Rotary club. "She put herself and her resources on the line to create worthy lives for all these girls who walk through the doors of the PACE Learning Center. Where would these girls be if they were not in this school? For this Deepa deserves the credit."

But Willingham, a past president of the Rotary Club of Santa Ynez Valley, California (and a past governor of District 5240), would never dream of taking credit for all this. She'd rather tell you about the tireless teachers, whose influence goes way beyond the classroom. She'd enumerate all the generous people and organizations that have contributed time and money to the school. She'd sing the praises of the Rotary Club of Calcutta Metropolitan (where she's an honorary member) and the many other clubs in India and around the world that have provided essential support. She'd single out those families and other Piyali Junction residents who took a chance on something so completely at odds with a patriarchal society that all too often renders females invisible. But mostly, she'd pay tribute to the girls.



Cycle vans, a gift from the Rotary Club of Calcutta Mayfair, transport students and teachers to and from school.

Miriam Doan / Rotary International

‘When I grow up, I will take care of children like that’

Born in Kolkata in 1941, Deepa Willingham was her parents’ middle child and only daughter. Her father, Manmatha Nath Biswas, was an English professor at Serampore College who later served as the school’s principal. Her mother, Latika, was a homemaker who was frustrated that she’d never been allowed to attend college. (Instead, her older brother had married her off.) A free thinker, Latika rejected the caste system and, as Willingham recalls, she never stopped reading.

Deepa and her two brothers grew up in campus housing. A middle-aged couple whom they regarded as their grandparents helped raise them. Later Deepa learned that they were household servants who had been discarded by society because of their interreligious relationship (he was Hindu; she was Muslim) and that her parents, both Christians, had taken them in.

During the summer of 1946, when Deepa was five, tensions between Hindus and Muslims boiled over in Kolkata with widespread riots and massacres. Deepa watched as streams of children, women, men, and livestock took refuge on campus. Then she saw her mother and father stand between the students and the suddenly vulnerable Muslim settlement behind the school. “The students were threatening to kill people,” Willingham says. “My parents, particularly my mother, said, ‘You’re not going to kill anyone until you kill us.’” It’s one of her earliest memories.

Deepa attended Loreto Convent, a Roman Catholic girls’ school where Mother Teresa was her geography teacher. Willingham recalls that, even then, the future saint was troubled by the crippling poverty she could see from her window. It was a lesson reinforced at home. “You know how parents tell kids to finish the food on their plate because there are starving children in Africa?” Willingham asks. “I grew up with my mother telling me to finish the food on my plate because there were starving children outside the window. I saw those children on our way to school, and I thought to myself, ‘When I grow up, I will take care of children like that.’”

Willingham was a gifted student. After majoring in botany (with a minor in geology) at Presidency College (now Presidency University) in Kolkata and finishing first in her class, she was recruited through a U.S. State Department program seeking the top science graduates around the world. She had never left India and did not want to go. Her father insisted — in part because he could not find a suitor for his dark-skinned daughter. “I knew that was a huge burden on my mother,” Willingham says today, “and from that point of view, I felt self-conscious.” She left for the United States in 1964; over the next 12 years, she would see her parents only once.

After earning her master’s at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, Willingham moved on to doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she studied molecular biology and met Richard Peter Howmiller, a biology student from that city. (The couple married in 1971.) In Wisconsin, Willingham also found herself dodging tear gas in the middle of Vietnam protests. Her embrace of social activism included a trip to Memphis in 1968 to listen to and march with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. days before his death.



Deepa Willingham is a member of the Rotary Club of Central Coast-Passport, District 5240, past president of the Rotary Club of Santa Ynez Valley, California, past governor of District 5240 and the founder and CEO of PACE Learning Center.

Alyce Henson / Rotary International

When Howmiller landed a teaching job in Santa Barbara, California, he and Willingham moved west to start their careers. One Sunday afternoon in 1976, the two were hit by a drunk driver while riding Howmiller’s motorcycle. Howmiller died two weeks later, and the crash broke both of Willingham’s legs. (Today she walks with an artificial left ankle.) The agony she felt seemed bottomless. She was angry — at the driver, at God, at the world.

But while working as a pathology department administrative director at Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital, she began counseling the families of dying patients. “In the hospital industry, even physicians don’t know how to deal with death very well,” Willingham says. “But losing my own spouse gave me an inner feeling of how to counsel others by just listening to them, holding their hand, and letting them cry on my shoulder. From then on, a lot of people would call me if someone was having a hard time. That was the beginning of my realization that something must be in there, inside me. That I can help people.”

Giving the gift of education

In 2001 Willingham was still living in Santa Barbara County. She had a grown daughter and a successful career in hospital administration behind her, yet she woke up on her 60th birthday and was surprised to find herself ashamed. You have been on this planet 60 years, said a voice in her head, and you have done nothing to help the world. Whether right or wrong, the voice did not go away. “At the back of my mind was this idea that I wanted to give the gift of education,” Willingham says. “But I didn’t know where or how.”

Around this time, spurred by a neighbor, Willingham attended a meeting of the Rotary Club of Santa Ynez Valley, and she found herself impressed enough to join. When she mentioned that she was interested in opening a school for girls, things began to happen quickly. Willingham soon established PACE (Promise of Assurance to Children Everywhere) Universal, a 501(c)(3) dedicated to empowering girls and women through education. Her plan was to open a school in Mexico. Then, Willingham recalls, “the PACE board said, ‘You were born in Kolkata, and Mother Teresa was your teacher. You should do the first one in Kolkata.’”



In addition to their classroom studies, students at the PACE Learning Center participate in afterschool sports and arts programs.

Miriam Doan / Rotary International

With help from her brother Bashker Biswas and from a humanitarian organization in India, Willingham settled on a site for her school in Piyali Junction. Situated about 25 miles southeast of Kolkata, the village is in one of the biggest districts for sex trafficking in the country. Many girls there are abused and sold into sexual slavery by their overwhelmed families for as little as \$30 — often by the age of five — or they are married off at 13. The lucky ones work the fields or become house servants. “Deepa identified the main challenges facing the community,” says Jayanta Chatterji, the India director for PACE and a member of the Rotary Club of Calcutta Metropolitan. “They were illiteracy, child labor, child marriage, child trafficking, and other atrocities, including extreme physical and mental abuse. And she took an oath to address those issues.” (Willingham is equally effusive in her praise for Chatterji. “God was smiling on me the day I met him,” she says. “I’m not at the school every day. Jayanta is.”)

“We can’t just give them education. We have to give them something to heal their hearts and their psyches.”

Willingham secured a parcel of land and began recruiting girls for the school, only to find their parents resistant. “The girls were part of their family income, so they didn’t see any value in giving them an education,” she says. “Somebody told me, ‘You’re taking a family’s commodity away. They may come after you; they may even kill you.’ But like Gandhi said, if they kill me, they will only have my dead body, not my spirit. And as long as I am alive, I will not allow the girls to be sold.” Willingham explained to the fathers in Piyali how her education had enabled her to take care of her own parents in their old age. But it wasn’t until she promised to feed their daughters two meals a day that parents began to agree to let their girls attend the school.

Opening of PACE Learning Center

In 2003, the PACE Learning Center opened. On that first day, 25 filthy and hungry girls packed into a four-room shack with a tin roof, straw siding, and a mud floor. The school was equipped with a few kitchen utensils, some portable fans, and a few benches. The early days were not easy. Girls sometimes disappeared from one day to the next. When teachers wanted to throw birthday parties, they found that the children didn’t know when they were born; they also didn’t know what a party was. Most of the girls had intestinal worms, so Willingham put in a well, providing them with clean water for the first time in their lives.

“Soon, any time something went wrong in the village, they would come to the school for help,” she says. “The roof of someone’s hut blew off from the monsoon storms? We went to fix it. When a girl was on the verge of dying from a hole in her heart, we arranged for her to get surgery free of charge in the city.” Within six months, enrollment had risen to 85 girls. Mothers began bringing their daughters and saying, I don’t want her to have a life like mine. Help me.

As the school grew, so did its connection to the adjacent village. When Willingham realized the girls were still drinking dirty pond water on weekends, she applied for a Matching Grant from The Rotary Foundation for \$15,200 to dig more wells in the village. (With a second grant, that amount grew to more than \$21,000.) “That was the real beginning,” Willingham says. “The village saw that not only were we building the school, we were bringing them clean water.”

With support from Rotary clubs and The Rotary Foundation, PACE began to build roads and plant 10,000 fruit trees throughout the village. They added wells and built 400 sanitation units. And then came the health clinic and the ambulance, the ultramodern commercial kitchen, and the self-contained soil biotechnology treatment plant. The PACE Learning Center also launched an adult literacy program and began offering vocational training for the students’ mothers. Little by little, what began as a tin-roofed hut grew into a sustainable village model for poverty eradication. “PLC is not just a school,” Chatterji says. “It’s a movement that provides holistic education to the first generation of girls in their families to attend school, while also empowering women of the community.”

Today, the campus covers 3 acres and educates more than 230 girls from nursery school through 12th grade. And those girls are thriving, often through force of will. With no place to study in her home, one 10th grader, Anamika Sarkar, lugged her books to a nearby temple where she spent hours preparing for the board exam, which can significantly impact a student's prospect of getting into university or pursuing her choice of career. (She received the highest grade in the class.) Other girls, traumatized by years of sexual abuse, find solace in after-school sports and arts programs. More than one student has written a play about the abuse she's experienced — and performed it in front of an audience that included her attacker. "We can't just give them education," Willingham says. "We have to give them something to heal their hearts and their psyches. The courage and perseverance that these girls show is amazing."

The impact of PACE

At the beginning of each year, families line up in hopes of landing one of the PACE Learning Center's 25 coveted spots for four- and five-year-olds. Admission is still need-based, but a funny thing has happened: The school has been so successful that the average family income in Piyali has jumped from \$1 a day to nearly \$5 a day. The process of identifying the neediest among the children has become so intensive that a former staff member joked that it was easier to get into Harvard.



Even kindergarten students are eager to learn at the school, which educates more than 230 girls from nursery school through 12th grade.
Miriam Doan / Rotary International

If all goes as planned (and hoped), the PACE Learning Center will one day build a full-time vocational training center for students' mothers, who are currently crammed into the space behind the stage in the auditorium. Next? Jewelry and spice factories, and maybe a village-oriented bank. Only then will Willingham — now a member of the Rotary Club of Central Coast-Passport, District 5240 — consider the school "complete," a prototype that Rotary clubs and PACE can replicate in other places. "After my first visit to the school, the lingering memory I had was of happy girls eager to be learning and developing skills they didn't even know they had," says Lulu Kamatoy, international chair of the Rotary Club of San Fernando Valley Evening, California. "I then thought of possibly opening something like this model in the Philippines, where I was born and raised. We have rural areas in the Philippines with conditions similar to Piyali."

In February, during her most recent visit to Piyali Junction, Willingham wandered into an art class being held in the school's outdoor pavilion. She was blown away by the creativity on display and the beauty of the girls' paintings — vivid nature landscapes and sophisticated statements about climate change. "No painting outside the lines!" the teacher implored.

Willingham winced. These were the kind of words she had heard growing up. "I understood," she said later. "India is an old country, and by sticking to the same mode, they probably feel that's the best thing." But she still encouraged the girls in the class to forget about the lines and paint wherever their hearts led them.

Your money at work: Rotary Foundation grants have supported the PACE Learning Center and the surrounding community. Here's what those Foundation dollars helped to provide.

- **2007**
Clean water for local villages
\$21,200
- **2009**
Adult literacy and vocational training programs
\$18,425
- **2009**
Community development program
\$330,000
- **2010**
Computer equipment for the school
\$10,696
- **2011**
School toilets
\$55,555
- **2011**
Diesel generator for the school
\$14,559
- **2012**
School bus
\$23,020
- **2012**
School furniture
\$49,215
- **2012**
After-school programs
\$16,869
- **2013**
Science lab and library
\$10,437
- **2013**
Commercial kitchen
\$17,748
- **2013**
Playground and landscaping
\$50,000

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