

Extending HUGGS in India



A group of HUGGS students show off the certificates awarded to them by representatives Marilyn Gullison and Helen Kline at a picnic they hosted in Vizag during their winter visit to India.



HUGGS Canada board member Helen Kline gives student Sai, who's going into Grade 12, a certificate for being the top academic student this year.

NV residents help underprivileged Indian students finish education

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A North Shore-based organization helping students in India make their dreams come true is looking to extend its influence as it approaches its fifth birthday.

Having started with a simple dream in 2003 — to help one student become a nurse — representatives have gone on to help an additional 19 underprivileged youth get the education they never thought possible.

Realizing what a difference they've made in individuals' lives — and in light of their five-year anniversary — those involved with Helping Underprivileged Girls and Guys Study (HUGGS) Canada, want to continue to impact the lives of Indian youth. To do so, they're looking for increased levels of community support.

"This is all about helping students in India," says North Vancouver resident Marilyn Gullison, HUGGS Canada board chairwoman.

The organization was founded by her daughter, fellow North Vancouver resident Lisa Heel. Heel travelled overseas in 2002 to work with children in rural southern India.

She met many people during that time, including a young woman named Viveka who was finishing Grade 10, the final year of free government-funded education.

When asked what she planned to do next, Viveka said, as her mother was a widow, she'd go back home to help her until she got married.

Heel further pressed as to what dreams she had, and Viveka shared that she'd always wanted to be a nurse.

"When Lisa came back to Canada she just had one thought, and that was Viveka must be given the chance to become a nurse," says Gullison.

Gauging the level of community support, Heel and Gullison got to work developing HUGGS Canada, later establishing it as a registered charity in 2003.

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photos submitted

NEW HUGGS Canada student Leela, 15, studies next to her family bed.

HUGGS' help extends beyond classroom

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The organization has grown tremendously since its inception.

Funded by the generosity of donors, its mission is to sponsor youth in India who show the potential to continue in their studies but whose families don't have the resources for them to do so. By providing those resources, HUGGS Canada hopes to help its students go on to contribute more effectively to their families and communities.

An individual becomes a HUGGS student, usually around age 14 or 15, based on their level of need.

"There aren't many organizations that pick up kids at that point and make sure that they then complete their education," says Gullison.

The students must be academically able and motivated as their involvement requires a lot of work. In addition, their family needs to be committed.

"As long as you study and do well, we're prepared to continue up until you get your degree," says Gullison.

What separates HUGGS from other non-governmental

organizations is its focus and interaction with those they assist, says Gullison.

"We decided at the beginning we weren't going to be worried too much about numbers of students," she says.

"We really wanted to feel that we knew the students and the students felt cared for and they knew if they needed something then that's what HUGGS was there for."

The society work closely with an Indian representative, and Canadian members make annual visits to ensure their students are well-served.

In addition to assisting them academically, the society works to address the needs of the whole student. In addition to providing tuition, uniforms, school supplies and tutoring if needed, they also work to ensure students' housing, nutritional and medical requirements are met.

"Once somebody becomes a HUGGS student we just want to do everything possible so that they will succeed," says Gullison.

HUGGS Canada's unique approach is working and the results are continuing to amaze those involved with

the organization. They were able to help Viveka continue her studies and next year she'll graduate from a nursing program.

So far, the organization has worked with a total of 20 young people in Andhra Pradesh, mainly from urban slum areas in Vizag and others from outlying rural areas.

They've had students complete high school, gone on to attend vocational school and others to pursue more academic degrees like education or computer science.

"Every one of them has an amazing story," says Gullison.

The youth they've supported are so appreciative and their involvement has had many ripple effects within their families, she says.

"Education is absolutely life-changing for these kids," says Gullison.

Representatives of HUGGS Canada are grateful for the level of community support they've received so far and hope more community members will get involved. They're always looking for financial donations, of any size, as it costs, on average, \$1,000 to support a student per year.



NEWS photo Paul McGrath

HUGGS Canada board chairwoman Marilyn Gullison (left), founder Lisa Heel and board member Helen Kline discuss the progress of their students at a community event held in May at St. Andrew's United Church.

The more funds raised equates to more students assisted, says Gullison.

The society hopes to get some North Shore schools signed on to sponsor individual students.

In addition, HUGGS Canada representatives are looking for volunteers. They maintain an office in North Vancouver and are in need of administrative assistants. They are also looking for help in planning a major event for September to mark their five-year anniversary.

For more information on HUGGS Canada, visit www.huggscanada.com, or phone 604-988-4898.