

Street Sanctuary

Can you spare 3 months to play with the kids on streets of Dhaka?

Poto Shishu Sheba Shongaton is a volunteer led organisation that works on the front line to help the street children of Dhaka. They set up temporary camps around various parts of Dhaka, bringing toys, colouring books and a few hours of recreation to the kids who are forced to grow up long before their time. The volunteers are students, graduates, local business people and professionals. For a few hours the kids can forget about their efforts to survive and just be children. The volunteers also use these sessions to talk to the children, create bonds, provide counselling, and first aid. If they find a child with serious problems or issues, they try and find a shelter or hostel they can refer them to.

Lucio who set up Poto Shishu Sheba 7 years ago says 'the organisation does not need, nor want any money'. The costs of running the projects are minimal. 'What we need are more volunteers to enable us to go to a particular location more than once or twice a week'.

We had the privilege of joining Lucio, Sifaat and their gang on one of their street sessions in Kawan Bazaar. This is a densely populated food market area near Tezgaon railway Station and surrounded by slums and street dwellers.

We helped set up shop by cordoning off an area of the pavement with a few sticks and some thin rope. Sifaat explained that their sessions are normally non formal drop in sessions. However once a month they have a formal session where they kids have a drawing or singing competition, are fed and sent 'home' with a gift. 'It helps the children feel like they are a part of something bigger and good for their motivation'. As we lay down the mats children began to roll up in groups of two's and three's. They were excited and jubilant. Today was a special day. Most were filthy, dressed in rags, bare feet. Some had washed for the occasion. Asma a 10 year old flower seller brought a few roses as gifts for the volunteers. She was confident and chatty. There was a sense of affection and camaraderie within the group. One little girl roughly 3- no more than 4 years old latched onto me. All I'd done was ask her name and made playful conversation. She held my hand, hugged me and jumped on my lap. She just wanted affection. I couldn't help but melt into the genuine affection and joy these kids brought to the group. Within half an hour there were 42 children in the group and some had to be sent away. We couldn't accommodate any more.

The children sat in neat rows and were told today there would be a drawing competition, with prizes for the 3 best pictures. They were given a clipboard each and a piece of A4 and our little artists began. All the while the volunteers chatted away with the children about their day, their lives etc.

In all honestly the standard of creativity and drawings were shockingly poor. But then they have little or no opportunity to develop their creative skills. Regardless, they were proud of their masterpieces. After the drawings were collected Lucio entertained the children with a 'Mr Marvel'

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style magic show and storytelling. The children were in hysterics. Meanwhile the volunteers began preparing for the feeding session.

Children were told they must eat all their meal consisting of a boiled egg, a slice of bread and an orange plus a cup of milk. They were not to take any home. After dinner prizes of toothpaste and toothbrush were awarded to the three best artists. Then, as the session came to a close, each child was given a small bar of soap as a gift. They were delighted with their presents.

A number of children stayed behind to get first aid including a little boy with an infected finger who got a clean dressing and some antibiotics. Some tearful with emotion discussed their problems with Lucio. I was touched by affection and understanding they shared. In fact throughout the entire session I was aware of how well the kids and volunteers knew each other, no airs or graces, they were a family! Two different worlds brought together on a mat!

Lucio explained the work done by Poto shishu is as much about the volunteer as it is about the child. Creating a bond with these children and getting an intimate sense of their lives can only bring positive transformation to the lives of the volunteers.

Are you up for the challenge? Poto shisu needs volunteers to enable them to set up more camps around Dhaka. They need a minimum of 3 months commitment. The volunteer must meet all their own expenses including cost of travel food and accommodation but in Bangladesh these expenses are minimal. Lucio will help the volunteer find accommodation according to your needs and budget and you will of course have a ready gang of friends to show you around.

Please email mina@orphantrust.co.uk for more information.