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Away from the Indian Tinsel

IMRC-sponsored program helps young Muslim Americans enrich their life experience through travel and helping India's poorest. **BY RASHID HUSSAIN**

Only when our flight was well on its way from San Francisco to New Delhi did my nervousness begin to register. As coordinator for the Indian Muslim Relief & Charities (IMRC) Summer Volunteer Program (SVP), the cause of this anxiety was the prospect of overseeing thirteen volunteers for five weeks in India. This was the first batch

paigned, which is run by Aman Biradari, a New Delhi-based organization that provides food, shelter, protection, healthcare, and education to the city's incredible number of street children. If this were not difficult enough, many of them are also exploited, abused, and have heartbreaking stories. From this first volunteer activity, the volunteers understood that there would

Although it has only the most basic medical facilities, supplies, and equipment, the patients were very grateful even for this level of service, because before they had nothing. Saliha Baloch, a volunteer majoring in nursing, brought along a stethoscope as a gift. Upon their return to Lucknow, the group spent a few days working with Tehreek and Nida, two nonprofits doing



HELPING HANDS: IMRC interns participate in launching the Zohra self-employment program; (right) Muzammil Qadri distributes checks to scholarship winners

undertaking the new program, which had been reviewed and revamped during 2007.

But despite wondering "What have I gotten myself into?" that flight turned out to be the start of one of the most rewarding and fulfilling events of my life.

SVP has been sending Muslim college-age volunteers to India since 1999, where they work with IMRC and other nonprofits to coordinate hands-on volunteer activities and build awareness and understanding of the challenges impacting the poor. The program helps the volunteers understand the different health, education, and social justice needs of the poor; enables them to experience the everyday realities of running a nonprofit in a developing country; equips them with the skills, knowledge, and enthusiasm to work for change for the impoverished when they return; and serves as a dynamic life experience for students to develop as individuals.

New Delhi was the first stop. Here, the jet-lagged volunteers used the first day to sightsee, adjust to the time difference, and, more importantly, to their new surroundings. They would all quickly adapt to India's heat, chaotic traffic, and general chaos. The most memorable sightseeing moment was the amazing view of the city from atop the Jama Masjid minaret. The rest of the day was spent volunteering for the Dil Se Cam-

be some emotionally draining days ahead.

Before leaving New Delhi, we took a day trip to the Taj Mahal. The rain and bumpy four-hour ride did not dampen our enthusiasm, and we spent the entire day there taking way too many pictures. One volunteer thought the Taj Mahal was overrated—a remark that generated much laughter.

Our next stop was Jahangirabad, a small rural city located one hour outside of Lucknow, which was once known as India's cultural capital. The train ride from New Delhi to Lucknow was a great way to see the countryside. Being a chai addict, I loved having the *chai-walla* walk through the train cars to bring hot chai every couple of hours. We took a bus from the Lucknow train station to the Jahangirabad Institute of Technology (JIT), a formerly decaying palace that IMRC has converted into a technical institute and which remains one of the many IMRC-supported projects.

Rural Jahangirabad was a very different experience from cosmopolitan New Delhi. Here, the volunteers spent a day at an IMRC-sponsored free medical clinic.

amazing grassroots work related to women's economic empowerment. People in India were amazed that young Muslim Americans had come so far to volunteer and learn about their hardships.

From Jahangirabad, we flew to Ahmedabad to work with Aman Biradari's Nyagarah Campaign. This work was very difficult for many of the volunteers, most of whom were unaware of the Feb.-May 2002 riots in Gujarat during which far right Hindus massacred over 2,000 Muslims on the pretext that they had set a Hindu pilgrim train on fire. Through working with Nyagarah, the volunteers learned about these horrible events and the campaign for legal justice for the riot victims. This campaign's volunteers and lawyers representing the victims inspired us all with their dedication.

Simply going to a place like India and seeing how the poor really live gave me an understanding of the issues that I did not have before. I believe that each volunteer grew as an individual and that the program strengthened their commitment to nonprofit work.

The SVP (www.summervolunteer.org) is looking for another group of enthusiastic volunteers for this upcoming summer.

Rashid Hussain is director of the Summer Volunteer Program.