

TURNING LITTLE FOR-NOTHINGS INTO “UNSTOPPABLE SOMETHINGS - ST. THOMAS GIRLS SCHOOL, KIDDERPORE, KOLKATA

- Jillian Haslam

(Jillian Haslam is a renowned Motivational Speaker (www.jillianhaslam.com). Her book Indian. English. challenged hundreds across the world in how they think about those, who by a quirk of fate are consigned to a sub-human life on the margins of society.)

'I was a beggar by the corner, whom no one gave a dime. But today, I read, and write, and speak, because someone took the time – UB40.'

This is one quote I love to use very much because it reminds me of the road I have travelled. A road that has seen me overcome many challenges to get to the point I am at today. But I always credit most of my success to one entity in particular: St. Thomas Girls School in Kidderpore, Kolkata. Because without them, my life would have taken a turn for the worse.



I am one of those people who come from an extremely poor background. And by poor I mean the kind of poor spent sleeping under the steps of people's houses because we could not afford a roof over our heads.

The kind of poor that led to the death of my siblings (four of them to be precise) whose cause of death emanated from the effects of poverty, mostly to do with illness or malnutrition.

A poor background which led to school after school refusing to enroll us, not for other reasons, but just because of our level of poverty. Because we were not like most of the other kids, you see. We had nothing – no

money, no political affiliations, no what; nothing. It didn't deter my mother who tirelessly carried on the search for a school that would take us in despite several attempts of being turned down. She kept on looking. She had to. It was the only true ticket that would ensure her kids would have a decent future; if nothing else, at least to stay away from the dumps we were currently living in and be guaranteed a proper meal every night. She just had to.

As Calvin Coolidge once described:

'Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'Press On!' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.'

And so it did for us. My mother's persistence.....



It was during the course of those searches that she fortuitously stumbled upon St. Thomas Girls School in Kolkata one day. Mr. Cameron, who was Principal at the time, was willing to lend an ear to my mother's desperate story and merciful pleas to see her kids get an education.

The big-hearted soul that he was, it didn't take him much to accept us into the school. He had helped her before and never did turn her away. Just a simple word – 'Yes'. A 'yes' that would change my life and that of many people forever. For good.

To quote Frank Tyger:

'There is no greater loan than a sympathetic ear.'

Forever shall I remain indebted to the good people at St. Thomas Girls Boarding School. For what could you feel about individuals who took it upon themselves not just to enroll the poor into school, but also seek sponsors to fund our education?

More than just Education

Now, what really touches my heart and endears me to this boarding school to date is that it was the kind of institution that didn't just offer me an education alone.

No, they were different.

The poverty issue aside, I was also a different kind of child in my own ways. I was the nervous kind. Extremely nervous. I suffered from confidence issues, mental problems; an unsettled heart. I sucked at sports.....

In other words, I was just a below-average kid with no unique qualities. Well, save for those. Notwithstanding, the tragic childhood my sister and I had endured meant we were very slow when it came to learning. The kind of slow that in developed countries would have seen us bundled in schools for kids with 'special needs'. Because it really took effort from the teachers to get things across to us.

Despite all of these obvious flaws, we were treated no different from the other children.

The teachers and matrons did not despise us and they always gave us equal opportunities, if not more. They were very patient with us, from the classroom to the sports ground.

Rather than see the deficiencies and flaws in us, they saw beyond them. They saw the suffering locked up within two impoverished young girls (and many more of us actually) who always showed up in class every day full of melancholy. And despondency. Heck yeah, they were right. We had been through it all. Fortunately for us, what else they managed to "see through" was our weaknesses which they would gradually turn into strengths. They went the extra mile and stayed late beyond regular class hours to ensure my sister and I gained that little something. And they would urge us to turn up earlier before the rest of the students so that we could go over the subject matter before the other kids arrived because, you know, we couldn't get it. The matrons would even go as far as sharing and purchasing basic essentials like toothpaste for us. And for those times we could not afford even a pencil or rubber – which was like most of the time – the teachers would generously furnish us with theirs. The long and short of it is that they nurtured us from nothing into something. Without making a fuss of it. Without being harsh with us. Without looking down on us. But rather, by being kind. And patient. And selfless. Non-judgmental but tender and loving, patient & encouraging!!

As the saying goes:

'Children don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.'

And that is when the magic starts to happen.

For them, it wasn't just about imparting us with an education and doing it just because it is what they were employed to do. Quite on the contrary really. They were resolute in their desire to take us little for-nothings and turn us into "unstoppable somethings." My teacher as I remember Mrs. Barbara Raha was an expert in this field. You couldn't be in her presence for five minutes' feeling depressed,

lost and forgotten when she would make you know that it is just a feeling, a feeling that will pass and that it is upto you to create a world out there where great feelings never end but "only you" could create it!! Meeting or speaking to this teacher and admiring her quiet demeanor, you would never be able to tell just how many lives she has changed!!



Empowerment is Key

Education is never a bad thing. Of course, that is no breaking news to you. It is something you hear about every other day. Because it is. It is the foundation upon which we build our success. My teachers and matrons knew this and this is why they invested a whole lot of their time in me. To see that I gained something meaningful from my time at St. Thomas Girls School. But what they also did was go out of their way to see that not only did my sister and I (and all the other kids there) gain an education to secure their future, but also that this education was nothing much if they didn't impart upon us life's other important skills – kindness, selflessness, persistence and perseverance no matter how challenging life gets, and many other qualities we need to make this world a better place for everyone. Noah Webster put it best when he said in 1788: 'The virtues of men are of more consequence to society than their abilities; and for this reason, the heart

should be cultivated with more assiduity than the head.' Sadly, this is not something that happens in most schools across the world today!! Many educational institutions (with some few exceptions) have one goal in mind: educate the kids, have them pass their exams and move on to the next stage of their life. They go through the usual motions without giving priority to those other very essential qualities, skills or aspects of life. While there is no denying many teachers go out of their way to ensure their students pass, burning the midnight oil at the expense of their personal lives, of great importance too is empowering students to face the life that awaits them in the big, cruel world out there. And this I speak from my experience at St. Thomas Girls School. It's school where I acquired many attributes but above all An Irrepressible Mind (a mind that refuses to yield to adversity, to hardship, to disappointment or set-backs!!) If the teachers and matrons were just concerned about my education and education alone, I would not have become the person that I became. It is to them that I credit my life as a public, corporate and inspirational speaker – the self-esteem and confidence they instilled in me that despite the deep poverty & deprivation I came from, I still mattered as a human being. Their ability to see beyond my worn-out uniform and torn shoes and into the soul of a little child within who was suffering terribly. Their ability to change my view of the world that it matters not where you come from, but that each of us is endowed with a special gift inside if we care to look deeper. Sometimes though, it needs someone to help you find and unlock it. For me, my sympathetic teachers and matrons played that most important role.

A Different World

It may sound simple in writing, but were it not for these people who were keen to give me more than just an education, people who made me realize the meaning of 'self-worth' and the dignity of every human life no matter where they come from or who they are, my life – if I had survived – would have completely taken a very different turn. Because let's face it, they could have allowed me to coast my life through school. Whether or not the sponsorship could have kept on coming I'm not sure. But if it wasn't for that extra attention they gave me, trust you me, I'm not sure where I would be today. This is why, I strongly believe, schooling should be more than just education. It is why education should render even a bigger focus on personal empowerment than it currently is in many schools. For it is only through this that most of us can unlock the potential within.



As the saying goes, 'It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.' When a school takes any child – rich or poor, healthy or malnourished, slow or quick learner, normal or handicapped, black, white or brown – and recognizes that every child has the potential to be great and therefore treat each and every one of them as though they are capable of greatness, it is then that you can only be proud to be called an educational institution. This has to come by way of action from every teacher, every matron, every member of staff and not just be slogans on banners or notice boards. Schools need to realize that this is the 21st century and children need more than just an academic education. In those famous words by President Coolidge, let's not make our kids' education derelicts by merely giving them an education alone. More emphasis needs to be put into skills which rely more on an individual's self-worth and self-control. Research has continually showed that these skills have a direct impact on how successful a person grows not just as an individual, but also in their professional life. Children who have these skills drilled into them tend to come out on top in most workplace environments and they also tend to be naturally suited for leadership roles. They tend to be well-rounded individuals who move on to become successful people in their respective fields and people who are ready to take on the world and not melt at the drop of a hat. Poll after poll has propped these findings by showing that personality and an individual's strengths are becoming important evaluation criteria for many companies seeking to hire in the work environment of the day. That's just the reality of the modern world we live in, so sticking to last century's script of repeatedly paying more attention to the academic aspect of education alone is no longer enough. Schools (and parents) need to shift from the old-school mentality of developing children as test-takers. Instead, they should nurture the unique abilities of the child and allow him/her to develop as an individual – not a student.

Evidence

Said Margaret Mead:

'Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.' It need not take much in the sense of costly school fees and powerful connections to attend the top schools in order for students to be empowered. If nothing else, it can be factored into the curriculum such that every educational institution, public or private, has a new rulebook. And by saying this I don't mean it should take a super-serious and rigid approach all the time. It is through trial-and-error, failing and trying again, falling down and rising up, coming short again and again, that children (and human beings as a whole), are able to take control and build self-confidence.

Living Testament

Having come from one of the most under-privileged childhoods one could ever find themselves in, I can personally attest to the effectiveness of this method. Because trust me, no amount of text book education could have given me the courage, resilience or mental toughness I have today.

This I credit to the sources of authority who surrounded me from an early age. To role models we looked up to in the form of elders, teachers, matrons and so on. While my parents were most definitely one of those sources, there is no way that my school could be left out of that equation given the amount of time we spent in that environment.

However, complex it is to shrink into a few words, my schooling I can best summarize in

Lady Bird Johnson's words:

'Children are likely to live up to what you believe of them.'

Judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, and it will spend its whole life believing it is stupid.

Last Words

In the Western world, an increasing number of educational institutions are shifting from pure emphasis on academic empowerment. But most developing countries are still stuck to the old way of doing things, at least in public learning institutions where majority of kids are schooled. And India is no exception.

Fortunately, we can be proud to say that we have a heritage of people who care, people who understand the hearts and minds of a child, and people who don't look at the colour of money, position or power when it comes to educating a child.

To the community, past and present, at St Thomas. Girls School, Kidderpore, Kolkata – thank you so much. For you made me the person I am today. You are a special group of the many unsung heroes who make this world a better place to live in. One student at a time.....

In the words of Theodore Roosevelt:

'Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.'

