

India's Street Children

Monthly meetings of the Dawlish U3A are frequently an opportunity to learn about extraordinary lives and remarkable achievements. June's meeting was one such opportunity, and one which can only have touched the hearts and left an enduring memory for all who attended.

Anita Edgar, who lives locally, has devoted over 30 years of her life to helping some of the most underprivileged people across the world. After years of working tirelessly from 1986 driving aid trucks to Romania, Albania and Bosnia, Anita felt in need of a holiday. Her daughter took her to Goa but instead of relaxing on the beach, she soon found that there was vital work to be done with the many children she saw begging and sleeping on the streets. She teamed up with a local pastor and together they founded 'El Shaddai Charitable Trust' and opened their first home in Goa in 1997. Today, they care for and educate over 4,500 children in homes, shelters and schools across India.

Without the work of 'Anita Mother' and the dedicated teams of workers and volunteers, the lives of these children would be desperate. Most have no homes, no families and, most of all, no birth certificate which entitles them to education and health care. They are sent out to beg or expected to work from a young age, on rubbish tips collecting plastic bags and cardboard to sell. Many have fled abusive parents and are vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse.

El Shaddai, which translated from the Hebrew means 'Lord of Comfort, Provider of All', gives children education and a chance of a new life and a better future. In a mix of residential centre and other projects, El Shaddai provides all the essential needs for the children, together with the love and care they so desperately crave. Children not in the residential facilities are provided with "Meals on Wheels" every day in many major cities in Goa. Children are educated and offered training in skills which will enable them to shape their own lives and escape the poverty which would otherwise be their fate.

The work of El Shaddai has broadened to include working with women and sick adults, offering health care and education, and helping them to gain skills which will enable them to escape the poverty and exploitation which is so often their daily reality. Micro loans are given to young women, many of whom are victims of sexual exploitation, to help buy sewing machines and other training equipment. In other states in India Anita has adopted villages and built community centres, sunk bore wells, provided goats, chickens and cows to help individuals, families and communities to have a better future.

Anita told members that she is soon to marry and also her work with El Shaddai is to change its focus somewhat. She still plans to spend two months a year in India, rather less than she does at present, but will be focussing more attention on her publicity and fund raising work in the UK. She is a very powerful and impressive speaker, and there seems little doubt that her formidable drive and sense of mission will continue to have an enormous impact on those who hear her speak, and through them, will continue to transform the lives of thousands of children and communities across India. U3A members keen to learn more and find ways to support her work can visit her website www.childrescue.net which shows more about the work of El Shaddai.