

## Nikhil Mandava, NSF Youth Ambassador

When my mother was a child, she was sent to a nearby Indian government funded boarding school because her village did not have any schools for upper grades. The school provided a good education, and it gave her an opportunity to pursue her lifelong dream and become an engineer. After going to college, she later moved to the United States for job opportunities. The education at the time was given in a Telugu curriculum, so when she moved to the U.S. she had a lot of trouble adapting to the predominantly English environment. Just five years ago, the school converted to an English medium, but many of the students were having trouble speaking in a language that was not their native tongue.



I went to visit my family in India last summer, and I decided to give back to my mother's school by conducting an English workshop via the North South Foundation APNA program at Telangana Residential School for Girls, in the town of Medak. My goal was to impart a little bit of my English knowledge to the students at the school.

As I arrived at the school, I was struck by its simplicity, small white buildings enclosing a dusty courtyard. A group of girls, all dressed in the same uniform, stared at us as we walked inside. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and stepped inside the office. My parents and I proposed our plans for the workshop. We talked it over with the Headmaster Ramanamma, and smoothed over all the details.



The next day, we came back, ready to start the workshop. I had spent days scrolling through all the APNA English material, and wondering how I would be able to teach all this to the students. There was a huge room set aside for us, and my dad and I stepped inside. Hundreds of students from grades five through ten were sitting on the ground, eyes wide open and eager to learn. Their enthusiasm

dissolved any trepidation I felt, and I confidently walked up to the front of the room. I introduced myself to the class, and I was very surprised by their discipline. When the Headmaster clapped her hands once, all of the students would start clapping; when she said “Good morning, students,” they would call back “Good Morning, Headmaster” in one synchronized voice.

As I started talking, a few of the students giggled, amused by my American accent. During the workshop, I went over the material for the spelling bee workshops, except simplified so the students could understand better. My dad had to “translate” my words sometimes so it was easier for the kids to understand

what I was saying. When I started the class and was writing on the board, I was amazed to see all the students copying down what I was saying in little notebooks, while still managing to pay attention at the same time. The students were eager to learn, listening attentively and all raising their hands to answer my questions. They were naturally passionate about learning. The students were lacking in money, but they did not let this characteristic define them; they were full of energy and bursting with curiosity. However, if they answered a question or spelled a word incorrectly, they would get flustered easily. I tried to teach the students a common proverb that I had heard over and over again: Success does not occur without failure. Everyone makes mistakes, but only those who try to learn from those mistakes will get better. Soon, almost everyone in the room was raising their hands to answer the questions.

Finally, before I had realized it, there were only two days left in the week long class. I had devised a competition for the students to have some fun showing what they had learned in the class. First, I gave them a short written exam, where I pronounced the words and other information and they wrote them down. Later, after the test, me, my dad, and the school faculty had to go through a heaping mound of papers. As we graded each and every one, I was delighted to see that a majority of the students had gotten most of the questions correct. The workshop had really helped them understand the pronunciation and spelling of English words. We selected twenty one students in all to experience an oral round. It was amazing to see the students somehow keep their composure in front of everyone and spell word after word. After three whole hours, the competition was finally over; the students had spelled so many words right that they had gone well over my list!

At last it was time for our final meeting. Although it had only been one week, I had learned so much from the students during this time. Over the course of the workshop, I had really bonded with the students and was sad that I would not be able to see them again for some



time. At the closing ceremony, we awarded everyone with certificates and small gifts, the top three students with scholarships, and donated a laptop to the school. I promised them that I would stay in contact, and with a heavy heart, I walked out of the school. I had learned more from them than they could have ever learned from my lectures. Even though those students did not have all the privileges that we have here in America, they still put so much effort into their education and their thirst for knowledge was always present.

I would like to thank North South Foundation, the students and staff of Telangana Residential School for Girls, and my family for giving me such an amazing opportunity.