

Life with Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena
Masumi Hayashi-Smith

Since the summer of 2009, I have had the pleasure of working with Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena and watching how the dedicated staff commit themselves to the youth they work with. The program is geared towards youth in Sri Lanka, encouraging them to gain leadership skills and grow into a new generation of peaceful and responsible adults. Using a holistic approach, Shanthi Sena programs cover many different aspects of life. The youth within Shanthi Sena have provided relief in the IDP camps, set up health clinics, organized language learning classes, conducted sports programs, and have attended intensive camps of inter-ethnic co-existence.

During the Summer of 2009, the bulk of my work as a researcher was to attend the camps of co-existence. In these camps, youth were transported from their home villages to areas of a completely different population. The remarkable thing about these camps was that for most of the participants, this was their first time intimately interacting with groups of their peers from a different ethnic group. The hosting villagers would open their homes to these new guests, automatically tearing down the barriers between “us” and “them”. During the programs, there were dialogues, sports programs, and cultural performances. The programs worked together to promote unity among the youth while at the same time cherishing their cultural diversity. Repeatedly, I saw youth change from being apprehensive and shy at the beginning of the program to wholly and tearfully embracing their new friends as they left.

I also noticed through my time with Shanthi Sena that the leadership was constantly trying to improve their programs. Continually, they made small changes and sought feed back so that they could best address the needs of the youth. Whenever I noticed a new change, the organizers would enthusiastically explain how they heard about a new activity and why they thought it was important.

All of Shanthi Sena's programs put together makes it one of the most comprehensive diverse, and large youth groups in the country. Additionally, because Shanthi Sena is affiliated with the over 15,000 village-large network, Sarvodaya, it has an even larger support network. The legacy of Shanthi Sena, which has lasted over 20 years, is one of grass root development and unity. The youth all work together to strengthen their own villages, and to provide the gift of their labor to the people of the villages they visit. My experience with Shanthi Sena has been very encouraging and I am extremely grateful for the hospitality of its leadership.

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