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HOW TO DEAL
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HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION

The thumb sized inlay marble elephant that sits on my bedroom shelf is more than a souvenir. It's my reminder of what I did, can and will do to help people in this world.

By AnnaSophia Robb

My family and I have traveled a lot over the past fourteen years (my age). We've been to Mexico, Canada, France, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Japan and all across the United States. But the most eye opening journey I have taken so far happened this past summer when several of my friends and my family and I flew half way around the world to bring supplies and helping hands to schools built for the poorest of the poor, the Dalits, the Untouchable of India

When Mom, Dad and I first started talking about a trip to India, we also discussed inviting some of my friends to join us because we knew we could use the help and we wanted to share the experience. I needed to pick friends that could work well together, be low maintenance, and know how to have fun. I'll never forget when I called my best friend, Erin: "Hey Erin, do you want to come to India with me?" "Hold On" she said, "I'll go ask my Madre.....Yeah! For sure I'd love to go and she said YES!!" And that was that, Erin was coming to India. I asked two of my friends, Jack and Justin to come along too. They are both interested in film making and were pumped for the trip because they wanted to make a short video documentary which they'd also be able to get school credit for. We were amazed we could put a group together so quickly; and I don't think we could have had a better group. By the time all was said and

Done our team expanded to two other documentary filmmakers, John and Kyle, and our guide, Niki. We all became really close and I'm glad we all had each other for this trip because it was going to get pretty emotional.

I first heard about the Dalits of India a few years ago when I saw the film *Amazing Grace*, a film about the 19th century struggle to abolish the African slave trade in England. It's a powerful story about a crusade for mercy and justice, but it seemed like ancient history until a film footnote said that there is ~~even~~ more slavery in the world today than ever before; India alone has 250 million people ~~are~~ trapped in some form of slavery. That's almost the entire population of the United States. I couldn't believe that this could be true in the 21 century.

What I learned is that the Dalits, which means "Broken Ones", are a huge group of people who are systematically abused and treated as sub-human by the caste system, which was created over 3,000 years ago and rules over the social status of India. Even though India is a democracy, your caste determines what your worth is, what kind of job you will have, and how everyone will treat you. The Dalits are shunned by the higher castes and are forced into the worst work and living conditions in the country. They're judged to be so inferior that they're not even considered worthy of being a part of the caste system. They are literally "out-castes" with less value than some animals.

As a result, they suffer unimaginable discrimination and abuse – especially the women and children: 27 million Dalit children are laborers; 15 million are bonded slaves, meaning slaves working off debt for their freedom; 1 million children go missing every year, especially girls, who are sold or kidnapped into slavery and the sex trade; and **in one study**, 60% of **Dalit** mothers admitted to killing a newborn daughter to spare her the life of atrocities that await her as a female Dalit. Many of them live in devastating poverty, without proper housing, food and clean water; no education, no political voice, and no chance of escape.

Before I went to India I read an article in the Washington Post which told the story of a boy suffering because of his caste as a Dalit. His name was Ramu and he was a teenage dishwasher, serving his employer as a bondage slave. This means he or his family had to borrow money from the restaurant owner for something and for payment, the boy had to work off the loan at the restaurant. He spent his nights chained to a radiator. That's how his employer – a man from a higher, more privileged caste – kept him from running away. Ramu wanted to flee because his boss constantly made fun of him for showing an interest in learning to read. I think his boss was afraid of his desire to learn.

Millions of Dalit children suffer like Ramu. Some are beaten so badly they cannot walk. Some have their hands and feet cut off to make them more effective beggars for their gang leaders. We saw Dalits mangled like this outside Temples begging. One followed me, begging for money. He walked on all fours, like a dog, on the stubs of his elbows and where his knees would be. I couldn't believe people live like this. Some will live their entire lives condemned to hard labor as bonded slaves because their debt is too high to ever repay. For example, a poor family may borrow money for a medical treatment for a family member. The loan shark will charge the family such a high rate of interest, the family will never be able to pay-off the loan. Some Dalits attend school where even their teachers refuse to interact with them. We have seen Dalit children being forced to clean the bathrooms of the other children before they can come to class and when they do, they are forced to sit in the back.

It's no wonder they call themselves the "broken people," and known as "rats" and "crushed underfoot" by their oppressors. Outsiders have known them as "the untouchables." Who stands up for these people?

The Dalit Freedom Network is one of the few American organizations working solely for the freedom of the Dalits. After meeting with DFN, my parents and I learned that the best hope for Dalit children is education. Children like Ramu can escape their status as Untouchables if they have a good education, which will help them to break free from their abuse. Instead of having to spend

their lives as scavengers or sweepers or worse, Dalit children can become small business owners and help their community...if they learn how. That's why the DFN has built 65 private schools (and continuing to build more schools) where children from all over India can get the English-language based education they need to succeed. They are taught that they are equal to any other child in India and the world. The DFN official mission is four fold: educations, medical, economic development and social justice. We decided that the best place for us to help out was in the schools. "Anything helps," is what we were told. "Your presence there would do wonders to let them know that they matter." So my parents coordinated a travel plan with the DFN and made airline reservations. Then we made a shopping list, and we bought tons of school supplies. We went to the doctor for the pills and shots travelers to India have to take to avoid getting malaria, typhoid, and hepatitis. There are so many precautions that we had to prepare for, especially since we were going during the hot, humid monsoon season.

Half our group came from Los Angeles and they hooked up with us in Chicago. We flew from Denver to Chicago, then to Frankfurt, Germany, and finally to India. It took more than 23 hours to get there. We were completely worn out by the time we finally arrived in the huge Indian city of Hyderabad at 3:30 a.m. When we walked down the plane's steps, the warm, humid air and its sweet, peppery scent immediately struck me. It was so beautiful and magical, even at the airport, the palm trees swayed differently than the ones in LA. I soon found out that wherever you go in India, it always smells like something. Driving to our hotel we smelled trash before we saw it. There were huge piles everywhere. Strangely, at that crazy hour people were on the streets, sweeping and burning trash, some were sitting and having a cup of tea, shop lights were still on and merchant doors were open for business. Still others were sleeping outside; right there on those dirty streets. Lots and lots of people. It was hard not to think about them as I collapsed on my clean bed. We went to sleep knowing that we were in for an emotionally draining two weeks.

The next day we did a little shopping for traditional clothing so we could present ourselves respectfully to the outlying villages we'd be visiting. Mom, Erin and I wore salwar kameezes, colorful pants with matching tunic tops and big scarves. The drawstring pants were big enough to fit both Erin and me! They were cool cotton and silk and Mom loved them, but I would have rather worn sweats and a T-shirt, especially since the boys could wear whatever they wanted. We immediately noticed that the boys were served food before us girls, and the boys/men could go places but—we weren't allowed to go by ourselves, like the swimming pool. I made the mistake of trying to wear a two-piece to the pool and an Indian guard angrily chased me off, then attempted to sell me one of their gunnysack swim suits (one size fits all). I had to change my suit and get my dad and the boys to come with us before Erin and I were allowed into the pool area.

The next morning we were scheduled to travel to the first of three private schools for Dalit children driving there was so scary. With no road signs, lanes or traffic lights, our bus darted in and out of the chaotic oncoming traffic; a circus of cars, people, mopeds, rickshaws, bicycles, cows, oxen, goats, donkeys, elephants, and monkeys! Street crossing to me would have been a death wish but there were mothers with their babies in slings wandering in, out and through all of this chaos. Crossing a street was a death wish in itself. The car horns were deafening; honking, honking, honking every single second. It was sensory overload. The sights, the smells, the heat, the people, the language, and the energy -- everything was so overwhelmingly vivid, but so exciting.

After a 2-hour bumpy bus ride, we stepped out into 100-degree heat and 100% humidity. The bus had stopped considerably short of the school and there was a long, flat dirt playing field between us and the school. Boys and girls with beautifully colored flags stood at attention in two long columns extending to the school entrance. Several other children approached us with lays in hand, made of beautifully scented flowers. They placed them over our heads and then a very small boy with a flat drum started beating out a steady rhythm and gestured us to

follow—I looked at my parents, Jack, Justin and Erin. Ear to ear smiles had broken out on all of us as we were bathed in the emotion of that moment. Here I thought we were here to give to the Dalit children and yet they were giving more to us by honoring our arrival, in a way I have never experience on any red carpet. At that I understood what an amazing people these Dalits are. Their hearts are so big. I have never felt so blessed in my life.

The school grounds were really dusty and dirty, but the brick buildings were neat and filled with nice new desks facing the teacher's desk and a huge chalkboard. It really made me appreciate the schools we have at home because the Dalit schools have just the bare essentials; desks chalkboards, a few posters scatted here and there, but very limited school supplies. Despite the heat, the children were beautifully dressed in crisp blue-and-white uniforms; the girls in jumper dresses, the boys in oxford shirts, and all of them in cheery striped ties. Many of the girls had henna decorating their hands. And on their faces were huge smiles. They were so incredibly happy to see us and were incredibly gracious. All three hundred students made a big procession to welcome us. They banged drums, danced, put on performances, sang songs, and treated us like family. One of the most powerful moments for me was when they sang "Shout to the Lord," in their sweet little voices, with thick Indian accents. This was a song I that I grew up with and loved. Here we were halfway across the world, in this little village in India, and these children were singing a song that has had so much meaning for me. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. These kids had so much love in their hearts.

Then it was our turn to share. We carried in the boxes of supplies that we bought for them and separated into classrooms. Mom taught art classes.—The school has little money for supplies; they use chalkboards and chalk to do all their writing lessons on. So when my mom distributed new pencils, markers, glitter, glue and drawing paper to everyone, they acted like it was Christmas morning. At the end of the day, my mom could tell one boy really had a passion for drawing and told him to keep his pencil and gave him a few sheets of paper to

bring home to practice. His was totally amazed that he could have it for himself. Even a pencil is a luxury that the students and their families have never even imagined owning before.

Jack and Justin went to teach P.E. with the boys and girls so they opened boxes of toys: brand new kick balls and footballs, Frisbees and yo-yos, and lots of games. Before that moment, the kids had very little to play with, so they went nuts! “Thank you sir! Thank you teacher!” The kids weren’t quite sure what to do with the Frisbees, but they thought the balls were the best thing in the whole entire world. When Jack and Justin, asked, “Who wants to play Cricket?” The kids shrieked, “Cricket! Cricket! Cricket!” again and again and piled on top of Jack and Justin, giggling.

Erin and I went into a classroom and read books to the young students, and we sang songs with them to teach English. They were trying so hard to speak proper English. I was amazed at how well they spoke for only being in school just a few years. Erin and I planned to make friendship bracelets with the kids so this was our chance. We opened packages of colored strings in every color you can imagine. Crimson, lime, aqua, purple, and canary yellow – a rainbow of colors was all over the room. We showed them how to braid and tie off the bracelets. They loved the tying and picking out their favorite string colors. They braided them around themselves in wild patterns, doing their own thing. They just had so much fun with it, and Erin and I had so much fun hanging out with them and watching their faces light up with joy.

At noon the children all sat outside on the concrete porch that serves as the covered hallway and dining hall. The children ate with their fingers scrambled eggs and rice for lunch. For many of these children, this is the only meal they will get that day. At the end of the day we gave all the kids “high fives”. They thought that was so cool.

I said goodbye to a skinny boy I had made friendship bracelets with morning and asked how old he was. I was shocked when he said he was almost fourteen. We

were practically the same age, but he was so malnourished that he was barely the size of my eight-year-old cousin. Most of the other boys and girls were so poorly fed that they had gray hair on top of their heads. It was a reminder for me of how blessed I am, and how even the biggest of smiles can't fill up someone's stomach. It takes real change so they can have opportunity to provide for a better life.

Many of these children came from communities of mud huts and crude concrete structures. One was made out of sticks. Many had tarp roofs. They were basic shelters but many of the families didn't even sleep in them; most slept out in the open fields. We met a girl who had been bitten by a cobra and nearly died. We met a woman who lived on the edge of a dangerous quarry where she broke rocks with a sledgehammer every day, all day, without even shoes for protection. One old woman wanted us to see the treasure she displayed in the center of her one-room home/hut -- a TV -- but she had never watched it because there was no electricity. Just a dirt floor, dirt walls, and a little thatched roof.

Some of the children came from a community called the Pipe Village. The workers started living there inside rejected, cracked concrete pipes, and now it's a mini-town filled with families, their livestock, and stray dogs. No running water, no lights, no heat, no sanitation. They had nothing and lived in devastating poverty, but the people cherish their homes and eagerly invited us inside, beaming with pride. We walked in -- well, crawled in to one home and I immediately hit my head on the ceiling when I was startled a cow mooing outside.

Back at our gated hotel we all thought about those people... We ate a hot, delicious meal cooked by a chef, took a cool shower, washed our faces with clean, running water and then we jumped into our cozy, cleaned turned down beds, and turned off the lights. Our new Dalit friends had never experienced these luxuries. Knowing how they were sleeping on a dirt floor at that very moment, while I had a soft pillow under my head, made me feel incredibly guilty

at first, then humbled by not only the blessing I have received from living in America, but humbled by the Dalit spirit. These people are so resilient, so patient, and so strong. They need so little and yet have so much to give. It really put into perspective my place in the world and made me appreciate the little and big things -- education, freedom, equality, opportunity – that I've been given but never realized was so important before. It made me want to use what I have been given and help them.

We had more schools and villages to visit, and even though we gave them useful things, they gave us so much more. Their spirit was so generous. One day after school we were exhausted, but we were scheduled to drive to still another little village to see where other students lived. When we arrived our bus was surrounded by a huge mob. We were a little scared, drums started beating and bells started jingling. The entire village came out to greet us! Women dressed in brightly colored customs, put embroidered silk capes over Mom, Erin and myself, and huge, heavy necklaces around our necks. Then the women started a circular dance and waved us over. The three of us didn't know what to do! The women were so friendly and embracing; they showed us when to put our arms up and when to step to the right or left. My mom, Erin and I aren't particularly great dancers and we had no idea what we were doing, but we couldn't help but join in and laugh at ourselves. We were exhausted and dirty and sweaty but enjoyed the moment so much, laughing and smiling savoring the moment. I've never felt so welcome. They treated us like long-lost family.

Having people look at them with respect is changing their lives in huge ways that hadn't seemed possible in that country ever before. Having a safe place to learn, immunizations, and a simple meal every day is transforming their way of life. For 3,000 years all Dalit children had to look forward to was a life of begging and indentured slavery. They were never allowed to dream of anything better. They didn't even know what a dream was. The good news is that India is a democracy. And now that the Dalits have begun to organize, they realize the power of their vote! In Delhi we met with a political leader of the Dalit movement

and found out that one state in India had elected a female Dalit. That's a huge step!

But change is hard. We heard a story about a Dalit activist asking a seven-year-old Dalit child what he wanted to be when he grew up. The boy just hung his head and said, "I can not be anything." So when we looked at all the bright, hopeful faces at one of the Dalit schools, my mom asked the students the same question. One said "A teacher!" Others said "A police man," "A lawyer," "A doctor!" One kid even said "The prime minister of India!" They never could have fathomed the idea of dreams or possibilities a couple of years earlier.

If someone were to ask me what do I want to be when I grow up? A million things: a college graduate, an actor...an activist. Mostly though, I want to be the best person I can be by helping out in my own community and by reaching out into the world.

But there's no reason to wait until I'm grown up when there's so much I can do now. So many Americans take so much for granted, so it's only right to help someone who has so little. That's why I'm sponsoring a four-year-old Dalit student, so Ayisath can have a good education all the way from the start. It only takes \$28 a month – less than most people spend at Starbucks each month -- to provide her with school, transportation, a meal every day, all the immunizations she needs, and a decent chance at a future worth living. That's all it takes to save a human life, so why wouldn't I do it? Why wouldn't everyone? It's helping educate someone who could be the next prime minister of India, or solve world hunger or find the cure to cancer

Now that so many Dalit children are learning how to dream, I have a new dream, too: that schools in the U.S. sponsor schools in India so American and Indian children can meet and inspire each other. It costs only \$125,000 to build a school in India. That's just \$63 per student at a single 2,000-student population high school in America. Think what a difference just \$63 could do?

A little bit goes a long way – it's true. And I sure am glad I went such a long, long way to find that out for myself.

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“I dream of an India in which every child can go to school. An India in which no child goes hungry and in which all children have the opportunity to learn, play, be healthy, and to live a life of dignity and self-respect.”

Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India

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