

UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD IN ACTION

Nancy Secrest



On a warm African afternoon one can find Usha Shah, MBE and Convenor of the Theosophical Order of Service (TOS) in Kenya, reading at the TOS's 'library under the trees' to children from a local disadvantaged area. Besides drilling bore holes for fresh water, providing solar lighting to a poor village, running "feeding" campaigns when needed, and providing training for women and young men in areas that will help them to support their families; the TOS in Kenya shows its lighter side by providing children with exposure to literature, art and fun. Their 'library under

the trees' is just one example. They also provide slum area children with the opportunity to explore their creative side through arts and crafts and an occasional party, complete with bouncy castles, clowns, face painting and ice cream.

The TOS, founded in February 1908 by Annie Besant, then President of the Theosophical Society (TS), has grown steadily for the past 25 years. It is currently active in thirty-four of the fifty five countries where the TS exists. In January 2014, the TOS had the pleasure of welcoming five groups from the TOS Ukraine into its fold. Already active in many humanitarian efforts, their service projects have bloomed even more under the able leadership of Coordinator Galina Burlach.

In 2015 the TOS Belgium joined us and went to work immediately by printing a brochure and starting a Facebook Page. Some members set up a healing group, and a project to introduce theosophical literature into prisons was spear-headed by TOS Belgium Correspondent Helmut Vandermissen. Also in 2015, the TS in Israel decided to make their efforts to introduce meditation to children in schools, the official beginning of their membership in the TOS. Sherry Barak, TOS Israel Correspondent and a retired teacher, succeeded in adding Quiet Rooms to the agendas in several schools there.

In April 2017, at its 48th East and Central African Convention, Tanzanian TOS Director Deepa Kapur was excited to formally launch the TOS Uganda as our newest member of the fold. She invited all of the delegates onto the stage, deliberately keeping one chair empty, then she said "we can no longer have an empty chair in the middle of the stage", and invited Aruna Meddon, TOS Uganda Correspondent, onto the stage as all shouted: "Uganda! Uganda! Uganda!" It was an historic moment. All of the TOS activities are supported and supervised by the International Secretary of the TOS, who reports directly to the International President of the TS (ex-officio President of the TOS).



One of the more serious international endeavours of the TOS is disaster relief, which comes in the wake of war and conflicts or natural occurrences such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes and tornados that displace families and disrupt lives. While the TOS's efforts are far reaching, we are a small organisation without the massive human power and infrastructure of groups such as the Red Cross, for example.

If there is a TOS presence in a nearby geographical area, donations are funnelled through that group and hands-on aid is given by TOS, members, in the effort to help victims put their lives back together. This was the case in Italy in 2016 when in April and October two earthquakes hit mountain villages. Patrizia Calvi, Italian TS National Secretary and avid TOS worker, shared that those affected are mostly elderly, and the TOS in Italy is still at work helping those who need it.

At the International Theosophy Conference (ITC) held in Santa Barbara, California, USA in August 2016, the TOS was honoured to make a presentation on the theme “Theosophy and Social Responsibility”. The ITC is made up of the many theosophical organisations in the Theosophical Movement. Organisers had heard of the exemplary help the TOS Italy is giving to Syrian refugees, including helping to set up a paediatric clinic in one of the refugee camps. They wanted to learn more about the work of the International TOS with an eye to expanding their own efforts in “social responsibility”. Other Sections such as the TOS in Australia have helped the Italian TOS with generous donations towards these efforts. Selina Hues and members of the TOS in Southern Louisiana in the United States, personally helped with rescue efforts and attempts to secure victims’ belongings in the flooding there in 2016. In recent weeks help has been needed in Texas and Florida in the wake of the devastating hurricanes, Harvey and Irma.



The old adage ‘When life hands out lemons, one makes lemonade’, is business as usual for many TOS workers. For the TOS in the UK, ‘lemonade’ comes in the form of knitted teddy bears. No one knows exactly who had the original idea, but Maureen Atkinson introduced the ‘Teddies for Tragedy’ project to the TOS and it took off. These soft little teddies, knitted with loving hands, are sent to children in need of a friend to comfort them. The TOS in England sends their teddies to children in hospitals in developing countries. Doctors found that children having their own teddy to

cuddle in their cot get better more quickly than those without one. Each child keeps the teddy and can take it home, so the doctors need a continual supply. In July of 2015 the TOS England and others received an award from the International Aid Trust for the knitting of 15,000 teddies! Five thousand of them were knitted by the Bradford TOS alone. The idea has been taken up by other TOS knitters in Italy, France and Australia, who have also sent teddies to parts of the world where children are experiencing tragedies, such as war or conflict, natural disaster or extreme poverty.

Other areas of focus for many TOS groups and individuals around the world are women’s issues, education and homelessness. In the United States, groups in North Carolina, Texas, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Oregon, New York and Washington DC make their “lemonade” in the form of care kits, lunches and other service activities for the homeless in their areas. Care kits for the homeless consist of socks, hygiene items, snacks and water and resource information, placed into gallon size plastic bags and personally distributed to the homeless or to a local homeless facility. Personal encouragement and a bit of Theosophy in the form of cards printed with Annie Besant’s “O Hidden Life” or George Arundale’s ”O Powers of Love” add a theosophical touch and complete the offerings of these TOS workers.

Preparation of these kits became a party for the members of the Portland, Oregon TOS, making light work of the project. In Raleigh, North Carolina, TOS workers packed bagged lunches for distribution to the homeless, adding notes of encouragement and decorating the paper bags with pictures of flowers. One bitterly cold night Nancy Bragin, member of the Abraxas Lodge in Pennsylvania, was watching a news bulletin that spoke of the plight of the homeless. Her heart was touched, and she went to work immediately collecting warm coats, scarves and gloves for distribution. She and members of her local TOS also brought lunch one Wednesday afternoon to an area where the homeless congregate. The effort was so well received that it has become a weekly event. Now, every Wednesday their TOS group serves lunch and distributes other needed items to the homeless in their area.

Image: On the occasion of a European Congress of the TS held in Paris in 2014, members of the TS in Ukraine received 175 teddy bears hand knitted by members of the TOS in France for the children displaced by the military tension in the Ukraine. Bears were then distributed in: Kyiv, Kirovohrad, Lviv, Odesa, Kryvyi Rig, Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk (birth place of H.P.Blavatsky).

‘As the service arm of the Theosophical Society’, the Theosophical Order of Service shares, in the words of H. P. Blavatsky, the “most holy and most important mission” of Theosophy “to unite firmly a body of men of all nations in brotherly love and bent on a pure altruistic work, not on a labour with selfish motives”.* It draws together like-minded people committed to respecting and serving the One Life in all beings. Further, it encourages the establishment of a personal rather than remote relationship with those in need, as suggested by H. P. Blavatsky in *The Key to Theosophy*: “The Theosophical ideas of charity mean personal exertion for others; personal mercy and kindness; personal interest in the welfare of those who suffer; personal sympathy, fore-thought and assistance in their troubles or needs.”[§]



Three years ago, Deepa Padhi, President of the TOS Bhubaneswar in Odisha region in India and International Vice-President of the Theosophical Society, approached the then Governor of the region to solicit his support in putting up billboards to educate people about violence toward women, in an attempt to stop it. He agreed. The billboards depict woman at all stages of their lives, affirming that they deserve to be honoured and respected and free of violence throughout their lives. Since then the TOS there has conducted seminars at work places and workshops in schools, put on street plays, published a journal with many fine articles

about women’s issues, and have now published a book containing a compilation of these and other articles. Proceeds from the sale of the book ‘Yes, She Can’, go toward projects for destitute women. Young women and girls from a local orphanage supported by the TOS there laughed and joked as they tried out various karate moves on each other. Unfortunately violence toward women and girls and rape is a major problem in India. While taking this issue seriously, the TOS made learning this means of self-defence fun for the girls.

In Kenya, women delight in trying out new hair styles on each other as they are taught the skills of hairdressing and manicure in order for them to help support themselves and their families. One woman painted each of her fingernails a different colour! The providing of micro loans to women to start small businesses is also being considered. Donations from other TOS groups and individuals in Australia, New Zealand, Italy and the USA, to name a few, have assisted in the efforts in India and Africa.

The Olcott Education Society’s Vocational Centre, while not a TOS programme, is a shining example of providing poor women with skills that will help them to be more independent and to provide for themselves and their families. The Centre teaches tailoring, weaving and other fabric arts. TOS groups in the USA and France help to support shelters for abused women.

Helping children is close to the hearts of many theosophists. Many TOS groups focus their attention on providing or supporting schools, particularly those that teach the children theosophical concepts and virtues. The best known of these schools is the Golden Link College established in 2002 by the TOS in the Philippines. Besides teaching core academics, the school teaches meditation and focuses on developing character, integrity and self-confidence in its students. At the college level, courses in Theosophy are part of the core curriculum. It is felt that these qualities of character will be communicated to others throughout the students’ lives with the potential of causing positive changes in the world that promote peace and harmony.

* H. P. Blavatsky’s Letter to America, 1888.

§ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, Chapter XII, 244.

Image: ‘Yes She Can’ project, TOS Bhubaneswar in Odisha, India.

Lara Sell was an 18-year-old university student when she visited Golden Link College last year. She has been a member of the Theosophical Society in New Zealand since she was ten and asked to join. Lara saved up for a trip to the Philippines where she spent three weeks as a volunteer at the Golden Link College. Lara had this to say about her experience:

“My first day at Golden Link was unlike anything I have experienced. Walking down the road alone I was a little nervous but all feelings of anxiety left as soon as I stepped through the gate. There was a class of pre-schoolers lined up and when they saw me they came flocking over, and many little hands waved through the air as I shook one after the other. This heart-warming welcome was a true testament to the loving nature of GLC. I was soon to learn that the school has the most amazing culture and atmosphere. I was taken around the school and introduced to most of the classes. I was met with a chorus of “Hello visitor, we are inspired to meet you” from rooms filled with beautiful smiling faces. I then attended some college classes covering topics such as theosophy, ethical values, music, and teaching methods.”

In his booklet ‘Establishing Theosophical Schools’, Vicente Hao Chin, one of the pillars of the Golden Link College, shares the conviction that “Individuals who are at peace with themselves will ultimately create a world at peace”. Besides giving general donations to the College it is also possible to sponsor individual students. The TOS in Canada, for example, sponsors two students, Clyde and Jubilee. The Foundation for Theosophical Studies and TOS in England have given generous donations for the Golden Link College, doubled by a matching grant provided by the Kern Foundation. The International TOS is grateful for the support it receives from the members of the TOS UK and other TS members.

The TOS’s educational work varies greatly and is widely scattered. In conflict-torn Pakistan the TOS provides home schooling for girls who would otherwise not be able get an education and also provides nursing scholarships to young women. This programme was initially run jointly with the UN Women’s Group and now relies solely on donations from the TOS and others. In Australia, New Zealand and Italy, the TOS supports individual home schools there. In the USA the TOS has provided scholarships to Native American nursing students at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation’s Oglala Lakota College School of Nursing. In the past five years, six students have received comprehensive one-year scholarships. Recipients are carefully chosen by the college based on criteria provided by the TOS.

The TOS in Finland and the UK, along with other TOS groups, supports the work of the Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School and the Social Welfare Centre at Adyar, Chennai, India. The Olcott School, begun in 1894 by Col. Henry Steel Olcott, provides a solid education for underprivileged boys and girls in Adyar, a suburb of Chennai. The International TOS assists the school by soliciting donations for their endowment fund. Many other TOS groups, particularly in India, run schools or educational programmes for children, and TOS members around the world sponsor the education of many hundreds of others. Including a school in the Democratic Republic of the Congo sponsored jointly by the French TOS and the Liberal Catholic Church.

In September 2016 forty-five representatives of twelve TS and TOS schools within India that are currently being run as ‘charity’ schools, attended a National Conference on Theosophical Education. The conference had as its goals: “to integrate theosophical principles into the educational philosophy and methodologies of the schools, to elevate the teaching standard of the schools, including the incorporation of English as the medium of instruction and to plan for the long-term sustainability of the schools”. Vic Hao Chin of the Philippines led the conference sharing the methods of the Golden Link College with those present. He will be speaking at TS Lodges in England, Wales and Scotland during April and May 2018.

“A truly theosophical education emphasizes the child’s inner nature and strives above all to instil values that will flower into an intellectual, emotionally and spiritually integrated mature human being who sees the world through eyes that recognize the ‘light’ in others. It produces men and women who are caring, unselfish and able to think for themselves. A theosophical education is free of dogma, giving children the freedom to learn how to think, not what to think.”

“As to the children, they must be taught at levels at which they can understand. Very young children can be taught kindness, caring and sharing through play and everyday interactions with others. As the child grows in understanding the lessons also grow to incorporate the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual components of life. Students are taught in a well-rounded programme that teaches them to embrace all of humanity and to recognize their value and the value of others within the circle of life. Theosophical education is nonsectarian. Just like adult theosophists, children are encouraged to live their faiths, if they practise one, while honouring all others.”‡

Nancy lives in Washington State, U.S.A. and is International Secretary for the Theosophical Order of Service. Her role is to coordinate the work of the TOS internationally, supporting established groups and encouraging new ones. From time to time she organises an international workers’ gathering. Nancy is also Acting International Treasurer for the Theosophical Society, a theosophical writer and speaker and has served in various roles for the T.S. in America.



“The Theosophical Order of Service embraces people of many different temperaments and approaches toward the art of serving. As an integral part of the Theosophical Society, the TOS offers a place where all can find support and inspiration in their social action as spiritual practice.” ♦

Would you like to join us in our work? You will find lots of ways of getting involved, as well as contacts, information on our many projects, resources and articles etc: www.international.theoservice.org.

For information and donations to the TOS UK please contact: Cynthia & Atma Trasi, 66 Kirkgate, Shipley, W. Yorks, BD18 3EL. atmatrasi@btinternet.com www.tos-uk.org.uk

‡ TOS Education Conference: Souvenir Sept 2016 ‘Theosophical Education: A New Beginning’ by Nancy Secrest.

♦ Tim Boyd, International President, Theosophical Order of Service, TOS International Handbook, p 1.

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