

My Summer Traineeship with *Ashraya*



Having just graduated with my Bachelor of Science in Cellular, Molecular Biology with a Minor in Asian Languages & Cultures from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor in the United States, I was determined to take on an adventure abroad during this summer before returning to University of Michigan to start my PhD in September. As a member of AIESEC Michigan, a non-profit student organization that acts as a global platform for international exchanges and cultural understanding, I found a HIV/AIDS internship in New Delhi, India with *Ashraya* - the Holistic Center, as part of the Action India AIDS Project. As the HIV/AIDS epidemic in India had reached a critical point with an estimated 5.7 million people living with HIV/AIDS by the end of 2005, I knew that this was the perfect opportunity to get involved with people who were in desperate need of help.

My experience during the 10 weeks I worked for *Ashraya* has been both very challenging and rewarding. When I first started working in *Ashraya* I was so touched by how the whole staff was so dedicated to providing quality care to our patients. During my internship, I became involved in the various aspects of the care home including interacting with the patients, assisting the health care workers and nurses with patient care, and helping the coordinator with

administrative work. In addition, I conducted in-depth interviews with *Ashraya's* in-patients. I was greatly impacted by their individual stories, particularly the discrimination and stigmatization that they faced from their family, community and even the health care facilities where they had previously sought treatment. Moreover, many of these patients came from underprivileged and disadvantaged society with little or no education, and so it was indeed a challenge to make them understand HIV/AIDS and the implications. How do you explain to an individual who doesn't even know what a virus is, what HIV is? However, with time, patience and counseling, I discovered the patients could be sensitized and made aware of their condition.

Moreover, I helped prepare the speech and PowerPoint presentation regarding India's response to HIV/AIDS, given by our chairperson Nafisa Ali at the 2006 International AIDS Conference in Toronto, Canada. This required a lot of in-depth research, from which I learnt a great deal about many aspects of the epidemic. India's epidemic is very complex and unique, given that the underlying drivers include poverty, gender inequality, and discrimination.

In completing my summer internship, I feel so fortunate to have had this opportunity to work on such an important dynamic issue in a country that needs a long-term full-scale response to combat this HIV/AIDS epidemic. I will definitely return to the United States a changed individual.



Lynn (left) and Alena (right), interns of *Ashraya*



Lynn with *Ashraya* staff members and patients



Lynn making *capatis* with *Ashraya's* cooks