



# OMHS

*Social change through  
the education of the  
underprivileged*



March 09

FRIENDS OF OLCOTT

## Olcott's Vision

It was 112 years ago today that Olcott Memorial High School was born out of an idea by Colonel Henry Steele Olcott. Adyar Day is celebrated on February 17<sup>th</sup> every year in memory of Colonel Olcott and his contributions to the Theosophical Society as well as to the Olcott School. In the spirit of his memory, we share a brief history of the Colonel's life.

Our story begins in New York where Henry Steele Olcott worked as a lawyer. Olcott led a very different life before conceiving of the Theosophical Society. He was a family man with two sons. He was commissioned by the US army to look into corruption in the navy after the Civil War and did such a thorough job that he was also summoned upon to look into the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. His life was successful according to the norm of the times.

But something was lacking in his daily routine. Renewed interest in Spiritualism in the West drew the attention of Olcott and he met with Madame Blavatsky and other intellectuals in a meeting that took place in the Eastern U.S. This was the start of an organization that would permit inquiry about various aspects of religion and philosophy.



Tenth standard students carry Colonel Olcott's portrait throughout the T.S. on Adyar Day

Olcott proceeded to draft a constitution for this fledgling group, which became known as the Theosophical Society. The aim of the T.S. is to encourage the study of religion, sciences and the latent power in human beings with the underlying emphasis on the formation of a nucleus of brotherhood with no discrimination. Olcott assumed the post of the president for life term. Olcott left his life in New York in 1879 to begin his spiritual journey to India. He moved into the headquarters of the T.S. in Bombay with Madame Blavatsky. En route to Bombay, both of them also opened a London branch of the T.S.

In 1882, the HQ was moved to Adyar along with Olcott and Blavatsky. Olcott would sit in the lawn in Adyar and villagers, believing in his healing powers, would line up to consult him for cures to various ailments. The fishing village nearby was even named Olcott Urur Kuppam.

Olcott traveled widely all over India and South East Asia. On his sojourn to Sri Lanka, he observed that due to British missionary influence, Buddhism was completely eradicated. Olcott prevailed upon the British to observe Buddhist holidays. Buddhism was revived in Sri Lanka because his efforts, and in honor of this, two statues of Olcott were erected in Colombo. Olcott converted to Buddhism and was honored with the highest acknowledgment as an erudite scholar of Buddhism and even granted the power to ordain a monk.

Despite implementation of the British style learning in place of the Gurukulam style, Olcott observed that

lower castes still did not have adequate access to education. Though schools were in name accessible to these communities, the unwritten and unspoken code persisted in preventing them from availing of these opportunities. Olcott designed schools that taught basic skills and provided to these children with immediate jobs as caretakers of the many foreigners that were part of the T.S. community.

Four other such schools were running under the guidance of Olcott and eventually were handed over to the government. The fifth school was adopted by the T.S. in memory of Olcott, and today it is known as Olcott Memorial High School. Today, OMHS looks vastly different from what it was over a hundred years ago. The school supports and encourages students from poorer sections of society to rise above their circumstances and reach their goals. Every year on February 17<sup>th</sup>, the OMHS higher wing students celebrate Colonel Henry Steele Olcott's memory by singing songs while holding a procession carrying his portrait through the T.S.



(Details provided by Colonel Neelakantan)

## Egg-citing and Innovative Counseling at OMHS



“Kids need concrete ways to think about abstract topics; such as building positive relationships.”

What does an egg, water, and salt give you? If you guessed an omelette, think again. Roshini Kumar uses these tools in the classroom to teach primary section children about friendship; one of the issues that were highlighted through a student-wide survey that Roshini conducted last school year. “Several children expressed that they want to learn how to make friends and deal with problems that come up in friendships without hurting each other.”



The egg represents a child who is feeling sad. When the egg is put in the water, it sinks; which is representative of how the child feels. Students are then asked why the egg

feels sad and they are on target with their responses most likely because they themselves have experienced the emotions. The second half of the activity gets the students to think of ways to make the egg happy again. Children come up with ideas like using humor, and encouragement to alleviate what is bothering the egg and helping in whatever way they can. While giving the helpful words, each student mixes salt into the water; the salt representative of the good deeds that each student offers. Lo and behold, because of the students’ good thoughts (as well as the laws of science), the egg is happy and he floats!

Through such activities as the egg experiment, puppetry, storytelling, drawing and drama, these young minds are shaped to think about how to be a good friend and how to work through disagreements without fighting.

Already the program has exhibited effectiveness in small ways. Roshini states that “soon after the classes started a group of fourth standard students approached me with a conflict that arose between a few of their classmates. They came to me asking for help with conflict resolution. Students involved in the conflict as well as their peers were concerned about the situation and had the maturity to come and ask for help to solve the

## Volunteers' Perspective

OMHS opens its gates to a range of volunteer groups who want to share their knowledge with students. These volunteers come from all sorts of backgrounds and provide students with a different perspective and outlook on life. Two prominent groups that have been dedicated in their mission at OMHS are Deepam and Wipro We Care volunteers.

Wipro volunteers have been a part of OMHS for the past three years through their Corporate Social Responsibility

program. They come every Saturday and work with sixth standard students in a variety of activities that contribute towards academic and social



development. The main goal is to provide an outlet for fun learning and they do this by small group activities. In this way, students have access to an additional mentor beyond their teachers and parents whom they can look to for guidance. Originally, the idea was to only work on building English skills, however, the scope of the program expanded and flourished into a gateway for students to learn team building and to develop self-confidence.

Niru, a Wipro volunteer shared that she is revitalized after each session and that there is definitely two-way learning occurring from the process. At one point, students were asked about how they felt about the sessions. One student astounded Niru and other volunteers with his mature answer stating that he wanted to learn as much as he could at this early age and therefore wanted to make the best use of these sessions. He went on to quote his mother saying 'ainthal vallaiyathathu ainbathil valaiyathu' emphasizing his point that this was the stage to learn.

Sandeep reiterated that he too is energized by his interactions with the children week after week and learns to look at the world through a different lens. One of the many experiences that stood out for Sandeep was when



### Terrific Teacher B. Lakshmi

Lakshmi was brought in as a TED teacher (Teaching English to the Disadvantaged) and wound up taking a full time posting as one of the few English teachers on campus. She has been a part of OMHS for the past eleven years and today, she serves as the Assistant Headmistress. Additionally, she takes on the challenge of teaching English to slow learners through a variety of activity-based learning and other methodologies. Lakshmi has completed her BSc and is currently pursuing an MA in Literature as well as a B.Ed in special education.

She expresses that OMHS is her base where she learned so many things from all teachers. "This place taught me what confidence is and brought out my inner talents allowing me to flourish. Everybody, from the teachers to the Headmistress, has been supportive throughout my time here at OMHS." She claims that her fluency in English is due to the opportunities that OMHS gave her to learn.

Lakshmi not only serves as a valuable teacher to our school, but also reminds us to forever embrace the inner student.

the students were asked to speak about India's independence. All the students spoke about Gandhi and freedom. One child came up to the mike and said 'I do not like independent India,' his explanation being that because of independence, India and Pakistan are separated and there is too much tension between the two countries. He added, 'Imagine if the two countries worked together. Our cricket team would be a nightmare for any other competitors!' The sensitivity in which this child spoke brought out a glimmer of hope for peace in the future of the youth.

It has been quite apparent to the volunteers that these students' perspectives on learning has shifted and moved more towards the philosophy of 'learning to understand' rather than learning to simply pass an exam.

"We explained the concept of what a role model is to the students and then we asked each of the students to think about who their role models in life were. One by one they each shared that they wanted to be like 'Ram Sir', 'KK Anna' and 'Anbu Anna when they grow up. I was so touched that they had pointed out our names as role models in their lives and that we as a team at Deepam had made such an impact in their lives" This experience was shared by Anbulingam, a member of the Deepam volunteer group.

This group works with ninth standard students every Saturday afternoon providing them with computer skills and more. The group was started by Ram Viswanathan. He was looking for a way to give back to the community.

The group has four dimensions including: general awareness, English skills, computers and internet and personality development. The group believes that computers, access to the net and skills to use them effectively are the

greatest levelers available today. The purpose of the group is 'to make a positive impact on under-privileged kids by helping them become global citizens.'



Ram expresses that he is in awe every class when seeing how the kids grasp and relate to things and he adds that 'I have been a little arrogant in thinking I am giving back. Nothing can be farther from the truth. I have been the one who got the most in this exchange. My interactions with the kids have given me a better perspective of the world we live in.'

Ram's point is expressed from all volunteers who enter the gates of Olcott. Punitha, a Wipro volunteer shares that 'there is a feeling of pure joy when I am walking along the sand towards that prayer hall and I see the kids waiting in anticipation with bright smiles on their faces. It brings me back week after week.'

OMHS thanks all volunteers for their continued efforts and commitment in making a difference in the lives of children.

# Thank you donors for your continued support!

If you would like more information on how to make a donation to OMHS, please contact the school via email at [friendsofolcott@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofolcott@gmail.com).



OMHS: Friends of Olcott

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Friends of Olcott

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**The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle of life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy and the courage of a lion- is it worth the name? Real education is that which enables one to stand on his own legs.**

**-Swami Vivekananda  
His Call to the Nation**