

Rashmi Basapur  
November 24, 2009  
Proposal for Second Decade Society  
Florence "Meg" Long Walsh Leadership Award

Empowerment of Indian Youth "Untouchables" Through Dance

As I passed the dirt fields outside my grandfather's home in Bangalore three years ago, I watched young boys play cricket. In the streets, boys were running around, chasing each other, and playing catch. Everyone I passed – the elderly, children, men and women – stared at me. And it was not because I looked or was dressed noticeably different from them.

I was jogging.

More importantly, I was a girl, jogging. Three years ago, on my fourth month-long visit to India, I became aware of the extent of a huge cultural difference between the country of my family origin, and that of my nationality: in India, exercise is limited. By gender, type, availability and access to resources, it is limited. Women and young girls rarely partake in any form of arduous cardiovascular exercise, and even the types of physical activities in school playgrounds are segregated by sex. Given cultural norms and societal expectations for a certain level of modesty by women in India, it is not surprising that the leading "sport" practiced by females in South India is Bharathanatyam, or Indian classical dance.

Bharathanatyam is the most ancient of all the classical dance forms in India, the most widely practiced of Indian classical dances in South India, and it is the art form to which I've dedicated hundreds – possibly thousands – of hours to master over the past 11 years. After my Arangetram (a three-hour solo performance, considered both a dance debut and "graduation") four years ago, I became qualified to teach this art and taught on behalf of my dance instructor. Over a decade of classical training and countless auditions, shows, and competitions later, my love for the art is unwavering. I would like to employ my skills to pass on this tradition to those less fortunate, but just as eager to learn.

I propose to teach Indian classical dance to the female students of the Shanti Bhavan School in India, all of whom come from the most impoverished, disadvantaged families. Shanti Bhavan is a free boarding school founded by the George Foundation, a not-for-profit organization working to end poverty in India. Located in the rural outskirts of Bangalore, the institution provides superior education, housing, and meals for the most underprivileged children of India's lowest caste, known as the Dalits or so-called "untouchables." Through the generous support of the Walsh Award, I will be able to volunteer at Shanti Bhavan while living in their housing facilities for 12 months, beginning in July 2010. Because the school is largely staffed by volunteers, I will spend my days teaching the students (aged 4-17 years) academic subjects during school hours, and Indian classical dance as an extracurricular activity. In addition to my travel and logistical expenses, the funding from the award will go towards providing dance costumes for the children, as those for Bharathanatyam tend to be quite elaborate and

expensive.<sup>1</sup> Shanti Bhavan has the vision that through successful education, the children of the school will be able to “help their families and friends break out of the vicious cycle of economic destitution and become successful and productive members of society.” I believe the school has great potential and would be honored to help the George Foundation meet these goals. As a volunteer teacher, I anticipate learning as much from the students – with life experiences so unlike my own – as they will from me. Throughout my stay at Shanti Bhavan, I will assist in both academic and non-academic duties, and take part in school activities.

On holidays and weekends, I am eager to travel to other parts of India and explore dance academies to learn about other forms of dance. Bharathanatyam is but one of eight styles of classical dance in India, and by understanding the cultural context of other forms of dance, I will be able to incorporate novel techniques into what I teach the students. Moreover, I will be able to better convey the routine and choreograph more visually interesting pieces. Aside for traveling for learning about dance, I will also be searching for potential dance teachers or students in Bangalore, where I have family, to continue with my project. The sustainability of my dance program is a very significant aspect of the project – after my leave, I hope to have someone continue teaching the students. For years following, then, I can look forward to returning as a public health professional and seeing the enduring results of my initial program. Women’s health may also be of great concern later in my career, as I hope to be a health care practitioner with a focus on public health.

I truly believe in the importance of physical exercise for young Indian women, and dancing is a culturally feasible and enjoyable form of exercise.<sup>2</sup> According to the World Health Organization, the principal causes of mortality in India are due to non-communicable diseases, which include cardiovascular diseases, diabetes mellitus, neuropsychiatric disorders, respiratory diseases, and digestive diseases. Cardiovascular fitness is critical to the improvement of the health statistics of the population in India, especially for women, who have the additional disadvantage of potential ailments and complications from childbirth. Proper exercise can alleviate some of these health concerns, and spreading the practice of dance can plant the seeds to accomplish this goal in India. The benefits of Indian classical dance are far more than the physical health aspect; while Bharathanatyam builds endurance and fitness, it enhances mental stamina and self-esteem for young women. For many of the girls entering Shanti Bhavan, hearing that they are beautiful, or receiving a genuine congratulatory hug after a performance may not be a common occurrence. While corresponding with the school for the past few months, I have learned that many of the students have emerged from tragic circumstances and undergone traumatic events, and I feel that dancing can serve as a type of physical and mental therapy. I hope to teach these young girls not only the importance of fitness through dance, but how to remain healthy on the whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Shanti Bhavan Children's Project (2008). *Our Vision*. Retrieved from <http://www.shantibhavanonline.org/about%20us.html>

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, Regional Office for South-East Asia. (2006). *Mortality Country Fact Sheet*. Geneva: WHO Press.

As a Public Health student and a recent intern at the Pan American Health Organization, the Regional Office of the World Health Organization, I have become aware of the severity of health disparities around the world. Because I would like to pursue a career in the field of global health, this would be one step in the direction of improving health in an international context. Albeit an unconventional approach, I believe that my dance training can be employed for enhancing the health of Indian females. I would like to give the children of poverty-ridden classes the opportunity to engage in something they may not be able to ordinarily afford or access. Through my own experiences with dance, I've become more physically fit and gained self-confidence, and I would like to share the chance with the underprivileged kids of South India to reap the same benefits. Combining my two passions – dance and public health – would ultimately be rewarding on multiple levels. With the assistance of the Walsh Award, I will be able to fulfill my idealistic goals, both professionally and personally.

Rashmi Basapur  
November 24, 2009  
Leadership Accomplishments Essay  
Florence "Meg" Long Walsh Leadership Award

Throughout my undergraduate years at Hopkins, I have been elected for leadership positions in various student organizations. One such group is the Hindu Students Council, for which I have served as the Community Service Chair for the past two and a half years. With the other Board members, I organize the annual Diwali Festival held on Parents' Weekend, which is the largest-run student event on campus. Each year, this celebration attracts over 1,000 Hopkins students, professors, and affiliates, as well as members of the local community. I have assisted with the extensive logistical management of this festival – which takes countless hours – since my freshman year. As a junior, I was largely responsible for the decorations for the celebration; as a senior, I choreographed the senior class dance, a performance which is a longstanding tradition. In recognition of our efforts for Diwali, the Office of Student Activities' 2009 Leadership Recognition Program honored the Hindu Students Council with Outstanding Student Organization Program Award.

While serving as Community Service Chair for the past few years, I have coordinated participation of the Hindu students in numerous service events at the Interfaith Center. "Sandwich Sunday" and "Healing a Fractured World," are two that raise resources for local charities and AIDS outreach centers in Baltimore City. Moreover, I have spearheaded monthly trips to the Maryland Ronald McDonald House, a place where families traveling from around the world can stay with their severely injured or sick children. At the House, we play games to cheer up the often unhappy children that are receiving medical treatment for long periods of time at Maryland hospitals. Volunteering with the children has not only developed my ability to interact with all types of individuals, but I believe it truly has an impact on all those who have come on our trips by giving insight into the heartbreaking circumstances of those less fortunate.

In addition to my position on the board of the Hindu Students Council, I have been a member of Shakti, the Hopkins Indian classical dance (Bharathanatyam) team. Founded in 2006 with a group of four girls, this team has grown tremendously during my years at Hopkins, now comprised of 16 dancers. During our rigorous practices, I use my previous experiences with other dance teams to assist the choreographers with suggestions for improvement of the formations and routines. Aside from the increasing number of dance showcases for which we travel to various universities across the United States, Shakti has grown in other ways as well. I collaborate with the Shakti team members each year to organize our annual intercollegiate dance exhibition and charity event called Nritya Mala. In the past two years, teams across the country have joined us to perform in this unique cultural showcase of artistic talent – it is the only Indian classical dance show of its kind in the United States. Moreover, through this event, Shakti has raised over \$1,500 through this event for Children's Rights and You (CRY), a non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring justice for underprivileged children in India. Hopkins' Shakti is distinguished not only for being an Indian classical dance team that has publicly fundraised a remarkable amount through a show for dance form that is not so widely understood, but also for enriching the local community with our culture and artistic endeavors.

My experiences on dance teams for Hopkins extend beyond Shakti, however. As a dancer on the Raas Team, a traditional North Indian dance form, I learned different techniques of dance that I was able to employ while choreographing for various shows. While practicing over 100 hours a semester for this team until last year, I learned to balance my academics and other extracurricular activities. Our efforts finally paid off in February 2007 when Hopkins placed for the first time ever in a dance competition: we won Second Place at the "Raas Rave and Bhangra Blitz" competition at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Then, in the fall of 2008, we won Third Place at the "Garbafest 2008" competition at Boston University. During my years on this dance team, Hopkins was recognized for the first time as a true contender at a national level in the competitive dance arena, despite our notably smaller size than our rival state schools.

Through my commitment to the Raas Team, I gained essential time-management skills during my first couple years at Hopkins that I now teach to other undergraduates as a Study Consultant. With the experience and wisdom I have acquired through my own academic struggles, I am now able to employ the tools I learned to inspire creative study strategies and problem solving in other students.

As an undergraduate at Hopkins, I have begun a life of leadership that I hope to sustain throughout my professional career. Each of my roles as an active member of the Hopkins community has shaped my vision and ideals of what I would like to pursue in the future, for myself individually and for my career. I have learned to manage large groups, resolve conflicts, inspire creativity, and rise up from failures. Upon graduation, I expect to continue growing and learning as an individual, utilize the skills I have learned, and remain a motivated leader in all my pursuits, in true Hopkins spirit.