

'Now we see how well off we really are'

MEMBERS of Luton's Mitalée Youth Association have recently returned from a fact-finding trip to Bangladesh where they made a documentary on child labour. The group returned moved and humbled by the experience – and with a greater appreciation of what we all take for granted in this country. Bev Creegh reports.



NEW FRIEND!
Anitra Elwakil with one of the children she met

He jumped at the chance to go again and was shocked a second time when the group started working on their documentary, *Stolen Childhood*.

“We did a project on the beach and saw the conditions the children were living in,” he recalled. “Two- and three-year-olds were selling popcorn and candy to the tourists. They were having to do jobs all day to get food. They were poor but

they were happy – because they had nothing to lose. It made me feel lucky that I had so much. When I was their age I had everything there for me.”

Muhtasim, who's studying business and finance at Bedford College and lives in Old Bedford Road, Luton, said he hadn't seen much of Bangladesh when he'd gone with his parents, but this visit had been a real eye-opener.

He said: “We interacted with a lot of people and saw more of the country. Most of the children are trying to sell you something – beads, shell necklaces, bracelets. You feel sorry for them because a lot are really young, but they don't seem to complain. The reason they work is to help their families.”

Group leader Ashuk Ahmed, 45, of Austin Road, Luton, explained: “We all believe child poverty should be eradicated. But what is more important – to feed yourself and your family, or go to school?”

Anitra Elwakil, 21, also of Old Bedford Road, is still visibly moved by the experience. The human biology graduate, who comes from Egypt and works

community radio project Diverse FM, it obtained a full-time community licence from OFCOM in 2007 and has been broadcasting full time ever since.

There have been seven international youth exchanges to Bangladesh. In addition to various educational projects, there are several well-attended weekly drop-in sessions and it was Mitalée, which initiated Luton's annual Meila festival.



HAPPY FACES:
Kids still raise a smile while living from hand to mouth

with Luton-based youth project Alm Higher, said: “We spent three days on the beach filming several stories with several children – we followed these kids from the time they woke up to the time they went to bed.

“There was one little boy called Ibrahim. We guessed he was about eight – they don't have birth certificates – and he was obviously suffering from malnutrition. His main job was singing for tourists and I can still remember the song he sang. He was responsible for his mother and two sisters. He told me he made 100 taka (about £1) a day... and we complain about the minimum wage.”

“He had no breakfast and no lunch and just a little bowl of rice for supper. When we were filming he asked if he could please eat because he hadn't eaten all day.”

Amira has to stop because her eyes have filled with tears and there's a lump in her throat. She continued: “They shake the rice in a sieve to remove impurities because it's very poor quality. If any falls on the floor, they pick up every grain. Their house is just a room. It has no kitchen and no toilet and there are four of them. But if Ibrahim makes enough money to provide their basic needs for the day, he's happy.”

“It made me think that the more you have, the more unhappy you are.”

She said there was a problem with the drinking water because it contained natural arsenic. She said: “We drank bottled water with a label that said 'Arsenic free'. But that's a luxury for the local people.”

On the plus side, the food was organic and fresh. “It tasted like real food,” she said.

Amira has come back determined to live a more simple life. She added: “I'm staying away from anything materialistic. I felt such a bond with those children. A lot of them are orphans and have never received any affection or attention. They loved having their pictures taken, something a simple as that.

“The world has messed up – our resources are meant to be shared”

our resources are meant to be shared. And even though you can't change the system, you're an individual and you can do a lot to help.”

Shopon Miah, 25, of Bury Park, Luton, was also distressed by the poverty they encountered. He, too, has been to Bangladesh several times but said it was different with a group: “You see lots more places and it made me aware of all the organisations trying to help the children.

“It was very upsetting seeing them work for such a low wage. It made me angry that I couldn't do more to support them. I'm normally a very quiet person

and it took me a while to adjust.”

Shopon was so passionate about the children's he stepped in to give about it when the sp ill. “And that enable a new job when I can he admitted: “I had presentation and be done the talk, I was nervous.”

He and Amira are return to the country month stints as volunteers for Volunte Overseas. “You see different way”, he said children get very children volunteers. They're people who take an them.”

“I used to moan a everything but now how much we have education, a close friendship, food and modern technology. Ashuk said the children were often and from the poorest in a society whose is based on wealth. none of the love and western children ta granted – which is respond so neatly volunteers.

“So what can we term?” he asked. “V raise awareness an example if we held raised 2500, it would a month.”

>>> The MVA is putting resource pack which copy of the Stolen Childhood. If you would like to know help, ring 01582 7314 mitalée@btclife.co.uk

History of Mitalée Youth Association

THE award-winning Mitalée Youth Association was started in 1984 with the support of Luton Town Football Club.

It was originally set up to provide football coaching and indoor social and recreational activities. It became so successful there were spin-offs in other areas. The association now works in partnership with several statutory organisations such as Luton Borough Council, which provides paid youth workers and

other support. There is an annual summer school in Bury Park when 30-35 young people are recruited and trained as

volunteers, who then go on to develop and deliver more than 50 different activities and projects.

It has won many prestigious accolades including the Queen's Award For Voluntary Service, Whitbread Young Achievers and Mentor UK CHAMP awards.

In 1998 a group of young people raised £16,000 to set up



RICE HANDOUT:
Food being distributed to local people



BEAM
Mess around Bang beach