
Heroes FOR TODAY®

CARING FOR THE AGED

EVERY day, Bani Mukherjee, a 68-year-old Calcutta widow whose six children rarely visit her, walks from the shabby shanty that is her home to a small flat three kilometres away. There she meets 49 other senior citizens who, like her, are neglected by their families. For

several hours the elderly people swap stories, play Ludo, watch TV, and sing songs. Sometimes, they get on a bus and tour the city's temples. "We like it here," says Bani. "We feel wanted."

This haven for the elderly poor is the brainchild of Indrani Chakravarty, 46, a soft-spoken Calcutta activist-academic. Raised by her maternal grandparents because both her parents worked, Indrani soon developed an affinity for the aged. And while



An Unusual Activist—Indrani Chakravarty's mission is to help senior citizens who are only too often neglected by their families.

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researching the problems of Calcutta's pensioners for her PhD thesis, she realized how marginalized and neglected elderly people could be. Determined to help them, she rented a flat in December 1990 and started a day centre, meeting the expenses with her own money and that of friends.

Today, apart from the day centre for the aged, Indrani's Calcutta Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology runs a number of other projects. These include a feeding programme and medical clinics in nearby slums, an "adoption" scheme which looks after the needs of 55 near-destitute elderly people, and a small geriatric day hospital and care centre. Funds for the institute, which has 22 employees and is also helped by a few volunteers, are provided by the government, private agencies and individuals.

Despite her busy schedule, Indrani finds time to continue her academic research on matters that affect the aged. In 1998, she completed a study on how the skills and experience of senior citizens can be used for the benefit of society.

"It's a shame how we treat our old people," she says. "They have so much to give."

—SOUTIK BISWAS in
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NO TIME TO SPARE

WHEN 15-year-old Malkanthi Dhammika Jayauriya gathered with her friends before classes outside their school in

Pepiliyana, Sri Lanka, everyone was in a holiday mood. It was July 31, 1998, the last day of term.

As she talked with her friends about what they planned to do over the holidays, Malkanthi noticed a man on the street shouting and pointing at the school. Following his gaze, she was shocked to see a little girl in a red dress standing at the edge of a third-floor ledge.

Malkanthi recognized the girl as K.P.D. Madushani Ruwanthika, the four-year-old daughter of teacher Lalitha Jayalath. "Don't jump, Nangi (little sister)," Malkanthi screamed as she rushed forward. At first the child stepped back from the edge, but then moved forward again. Malkanthi realized the girl was about to jump.

She judged where Madushani would hit the ground and held out her arms just as the little girl jumped. Madushani fell directly into Malkanthi's outstretched hands, suffering only a small scrape on her knee. Malkanthi was unharmed.

It turned out that Madushani, who had accompanied her mother to school, had wandered away from the staff room. In an empty classroom, she climbed on a desk to look out of the window, then stepped onto the ledge. The child saw the school children below and, lacking an appreciation of heights, decided the best way to get to them would be to jump. As she later said, "I flew like a crow and Akki (big sister) caught me."

At a special ceremony in Colombo,