

Refuge for the old & homeless

KOLKATA: She came one sad morning in 1988. She did not know what the future held for her. She was swept off her feet when she found affection, work to occupy herself and some earnings.

The Calcutta Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology (CMIG), an NGO running day-care centres at two places in the metropolis brought back the zest for life for her, one who had seen 66 increasingly harsh winters.

"It looked as if the sky fell on my head and the earth caved in beneath my feet when my son died. It was a struggle for survival for my daughter-in-law and me," says bespectacled Mangal Santra.

She is the oldest member of one of the two day-care centres, at Beliaghata and on the EM Bypass, which together provide an occupation for four hours a day for about 100 others like her — old, unloved and nobody to turn to.

"But this organisation was god-sent," she says with gratitude. Founded with the aim to help the old and the abandoned and promoting multi-disciplinary research in the field of gerontology, the

CMIG cares for the poorest of the poor, giving them nutritious food and free medical treatment.

"The CMIG was founded to help and give relief to the old and at the same time to instil a sense of confidence in their own capabilities," says CMIG president Indrani Chakraborty.

"I know. I was brought up by my grandparents. People who have grown old want somebody to talk to, do some work, while the world remains forever busy," Chakraborty says, pointing to the elderly women industriously using their gnarled fingers to make *thongas* (paper bags).

"They make 70-80 *thongas* and sell them to nearby shops with each earning rupees four daily," she asks.

"Peanuts. Isn't it? But the fact that they are contributing something to the income of their struggling families gives them immense satisfaction," Chakraborty, who has studied gerontology in Japan, says.

The elders who have found new

found joy in their lives are also taken out on short excursions.

"Only yesterday they went to Belur," says the CMIG president since most of them want to visit pilgrim spots.

Indoors, there is television and even computers. "I never dreamt that I would ever watch TV again. We feel unhappy when we return home because we don't have a television set," confesses 69-year old Nibha Ray who stays with her nephew.

"*Aamar ekhenaiye bhalo lage.*

Bari jete ichha korena (I feel happy here. I don't feel like going home), echoes another old woman breaking into a smile.

There are computers for those who have learnt to use it before retirement.

The income from job work for those who can click a mouse and use the keyboard goes to them, Chakraborty says.

A team from the NGO selects those to be taken care off within a radius of three kilometres, since those picked must be able to reach

the centres every day. None are allowed to stay beyond four hours daily, explains Chakraborty.

But there is a limit to the number each of the centres can accommodate. "We take only 50 persons for each centre. In case someone drops out or a death occurs, we fill the vacancy through the same process," she says.

"Some have been abandoned. Others live with distant relatives. But their cost of living is now shared by us," she says with pride. "The fear of insecurity now no longer dogs them."

Besides company and work, the NGO with the help of funds partly donated by the government provides rations to those enlisted.

The CMIG also has a unique programme of *Helpage — Adopt a Granny* — which provides "destitute elders with food, clothing, items for personal hygiene, supplementary nutrition, healthcare and rations worth Rs 380 each every month," she says.

One of the centres has arrangements for physiotherapy. Doctors come thrice a week for conducting free checkups. (PT)

DAY-CARE CENTRES