

GB Salesian Past Pupils Around The World

Recent happenings have thrown light on the activities of just two Past Pupils from two of our Salesian Colleges, namely **Battersea, London** and **Thornleigh, Bolton**.

With the kind permission of Father Anthony Bailey SDB, Editor of “Don Bosco Today” and of Father Robert Gardner SDB, Editor of “Bosco Volunteer Action (BOVA) - two Salesian publications that are well worth a read - we are able to bring news of these activities to our Readers.

These are two quite different stories, of two quite different Past Pupils, from two different Colleges, but from a common Salesian Educational heritage, namely, the **Salesian Preventive System of Education**.

Firstly, we have the story of the Thornleigh, Bolton, Past Pupil, **Danny Boyle**, who is now known all over the world, through his amazing success with the film:

Slumdog Millionaire

Without doubt one of the greatest hits of 2009 is the new film by Danny Boyle, *Slumdog Millionaire*. It tells a very basic tale of rags to riches, with love conquering all, set in the Dharavi slum of modern Mumbai. It is a film made in the centre of the so-called *Bollywood* cinema industry and speaks volumes for this production as it crosses over the cultural divides and makes us realise that we do live in a global village. It has the universal appeal of the victory of good over evil. Many honours,



including BAFTA and Oscar nominations, have been bestowed upon both cast and crew.

The young hero, Jamal Malik is a contestant on an Indian TV version of the universally popular game show, *Who wants to be a Millionaire?* For those few who have never seen the programme, the format is very simple: answer a series of questions and win a million pounds - you can even ring a friend for help or ask the opinion of the audience. In the movie, Jamal is accused of cheating as he moves closer to that top prize and he is arrested. He is able to show, through a series of flashbacks to his childhood in the slums, that his knowledge is not book or school-based, but his learning comes through the harsh realities of having to survive in a cruel world.

These scenes of life in the slums are perhaps the most moving of the film; Danny Boyle has often commented on how real poverty can be seen nightly on the television news, but to really experience it you must smell it and taste it. Indeed it is to the producer's credit that they did not choose to film it on a vast soundstage in leafy Surrey, but they worked exclusively in Mumbai, using a cast of local children with no formal acting training.

These are the real stars of the film; they speak and act with complete honesty that perhaps reflects their own situation. Indeed the screen writer, Simon Beaufoy wanted this reality to be obvious throughout the film, *I wanted to get (across) the sense of this huge amount of fun, laughter, chat, and sense of community that is in these slums. What you pick up on is this mass of energy.* Energy is evident in the film from that opening chase through Dharavi to the final explosive Bollywood-style dance routine, with Jamal finally winning over the only love of his life, Latika.

I was lucky enough to watch the film with a fellow Salesian, Fr Gerry Broidy, who spent some time with the Salesian *Breads* project in Southern India. The film rang true with many of his recollections of working with the youngsters on the project - it gives a true portrayal of how millions of people have to live in our world on a daily basis. Boyle does not seek to sanitize it or dress it up: he tells it as it is, while pointing to the fact that India is fast becoming a new force to be reckoned with.

Danny Boyle is a Lancastrian by birth and attended Thornleigh Salesian College in Bolton. Any remote thoughts of becoming a Salesian or entering the priesthood were soon dismissed by the gentle, Fr James Conway. As Danny later related, *I don't know if he was trying to save me or the priesthood.* Like Danny, I was lucky enough to be a pupil of the most wonderfully charismatic teacher of English Literature, Mr Frank Unsworth. To the sixth formers of Thornleigh he was a hero: as he not only taught us literature, but was also our drama coach and took us to the theatre, especially to Stratford where we could see Shakespeare. While some of us moved on to industry or commerce or even became Salesians of Don Bosco, Danny followed that vision given to each of us by Mr Unsworth and went on to study drama at Bangor - the rest, as they say, is history.

The word *Slumdog* probably means *the underdog from the slums.*

Vision and encouragement is something we all need in life; Don Bosco saw that this was crucial in his system of education. We need the challenge of the next question and we should not be content with second best. *Slumdog Millionaire* offers each of us a chance to reflect on where we are going in life.

Gerry O'Shaughnessy SDB

Slumdogs of Don Bosco

What are the Salesians doing for the children of the slums of India? When I searched the internet I discovered a new site entitled -

www.slumdogs.org

This site answered the question. Under the heading ***Salesians in India*** we read

SALESIAN WORK FOR THE YOUNG AT RISK

A formidable network of services, as astounding for its variety and reach as for its impact!

- 354 Street Presences,
- 100 Shelter Homes,
- 117 Children's Homes,
- 233 Street Education Centres,
- 63 Vocational Training Centres,
- 29 Advocacy Units,
- 35 Missing Child Search Units,
- 26 24-Hour Childline Centres,
- and a host of other projects across **72 cities and towns throughout India** – undeniably the most vigorous expression of Salesian India's concern for the 'Young at Risk', the most neglected and vulnerable section of the country's youth.

• The expression *Young at Risk* (YaR) embraces children and young people whose safety, growth and development are put at risk through indifference and neglect on the part of parents as well as society. Generally, the term refers to runaway children, school dropouts, rag-pickers, street children, child workers, young drug addicts, orphans; those abandoned, abused or exploited; refugee-children, victims of war, violence and calamities.

Inspired by Don Bosco, in the past thirty years or so the Salesians in India have clearly established themselves as the pioneers in bringing new hope for children in difficult situations. Interestingly, their *move to the streets* in the 1970s was triggered off by the helplessness of a City Corporation.

In 1974, the Mayor of Cochin was confronted with a problem. He had on his hand 110 young delinquents – an unruly pack, indeed, of rough and tough pickpockets, shoplifters, rag-pickers, and runaways. The police had rounded them up from the city's railway stations, bus stands, market places and streets. The Mayor was convinced that keeping them confined in a *settlement* under police surveillance was not the best solution, but he couldn't see any alternative till, of course, he heard of the Salesians. He approached Fr. Varghese Menacherry, the Director of Don Bosco Youth Centre at Vaduthala. *Would the Don Bosco people be able to do something for these delinquent children? They are troublesome kids, but we need to do something for them*, he pleaded. Fr. Varghese nodded in agreement and added, *Definitely. They need to be taken care of; they need to be guided and taught some skills to help them earn a living*. The Corporation authorities promised to provide the place to keep them and also to meet all the expenses of looking after them, if only Don Bosco would accept them.

Fr. Varghese contacted Fr. Thomas Panakezham, the Provincial of Madras, who gave the project full support and encouragement. And so, on the 31st May 1974, the Salesians received the first batch of 110 youngsters from the Municipal Corporation of Cochin in an old warehouse of the Corporation in Palluruthy, which they christened Snehā Bhavan (House of Love).

Thus began a new chapter in the history of Salesian Youth Ministry in India – a conscious movement towards *street children*, those roofless and rootless young people one finds everywhere, especially in the cities, eking out an existence by picking up things from around railway stations, bus stands and market places. Soon Sneha Bhavan's ripple effect began to be felt across Salesian India, especially among the younger generation.

More and more Salesians began to show a new interest in working for these young people.

In 1977-79, Fr Joe Fernandez did the first-ever scientific study on *street children* in India, as part of his Master's in Social Work at the Madras School of Social Work in Chennai. As his study was nearing completion, Door Darshan, the national TV channel, (then in its black-and-white infancy years) telecast an interview with Fr Joe, highlighting some of the important findings of his study. Several photographs, showing the life of children on the streets were also shown on the TV during the interview. Soon UNICEF got interested in these photographs and bought them for their campaigns during the 1979 International Year of the Child.

Without doubt, Fr Joe's study of the *paper-pickers* of Madras did create a new awareness of the phenomenon of street children. In fact, beginning from 1980, the Salesian students of theology at Kristu Jyoti College, Bangalore, started venturing out into the streets of the city, contacting the rag-pickers, under the banner of *Project Outreach*. In course of time, through the young priests who passed out of Kristu Jyoti, this initiative found echoes in all the provinces of India.

Our second, very different story, is of a very young Battersea Past Pupil, **Mark Cioni**. Mark has recently started a tour of duty in El Salvador as a Don Bosco Volunteer. This will never get the oxygen of publicity of *Slumdog Millionaire*, but nevertheless is vital to Salesian work for the poor and the young around the world, and valuable for the development of young Salesian Past Pupils.



Bosco Volunteer Action

Learning through action; serving the young and the poor
alongside Salesian communities around the world

By the lake



“Hola y buenos dias, hello everyone. Hope to find you all well.”

This is just a note to keep you up-dated with how it is going in Santa Ana, El Salvador at the end of my third week.

It has been really awesome start to my volunteer experience with a lot of cultural learning and I have made a good start to life here. I am learning Spanish of the Americas. It is a bit different to Spanish Castellano so I am trying my best to understand. The muchachos (kids) are testing my comprehension skills all the time.

I've got a big room in the school grounds where there are a few rooms at the foot of a hill. It has a spare bed so if anyone wants to stay over when they visit they can.

I am living as part of the Salesian community. I am the only volunteer here now as the last couple of volunteers from Spain left recently. The school employs lots of staff like cooks, laundry service, security etc. They help the place to run smoothly, and look after the children and university students who live here during school term plus of course the Priests, Brothers and volunteers who all need feeding but really everyone pulls together to make it work. So I get 3 cooked meals a day including weekends. A normal meal consists of Frijoles (black Beans purified) tortillas, steaks, rice and fruit. As always I like the food and am eating healthy portions!

The muchachos share 4-5 in a room, they clean their own things and look after their accommodation which is simple but effective. I am on duty in the evening to make sure that lights are out by 9pm. The boys who live here are resilient and I believe that there are so many important lessons being learned living here.

I have been teaching English in the mornings from 7:20am to 12. We, as a community, are woken up at 5.30 by a cock-a-doodle-do over the loudspeaker and the beginning of the national anthem with the slogan "mucho buenos dias muchachos" translating to 'very good morning children'. It is good practice for me to help wake up.

I have been up in the mountains and volcanoes a few times with class groups and with colleagues. I stayed in log cabin in the Volcan de Santa Ana last weekend and we cooked our dinner and grilled steaks on an outdoor open wood fire and then sat through a tropical rain storm. I swam in Coatepeque lake, which you can see in one of the attached pictures, and am generally just getting on with every day life.



“Good bye and god bless you.” Mark Cioni

In the Mountains