

Winter Newsletter 2020

Assam Foundation of North America



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Historic Walk-A-Thon Awareness drive for Akshar Foundation

By Sagarika Bhuyan

In staying true to its mission in supporting the Guwahati based Akshar Foundation's Green School Initiative that accepts plastic waste as school fees, the Assam Foundation of North America (AFNA) organized the debut edition of the 5km Walk-A-Thon at Plainsboro Township in New Jersey last month. The Mayor of Plainsboro and the residents of New Jersey and Pennsylvania supported the cause whole-heartedly.

The cold and windy Sunday morning on November 3rd couldn't get any warmer, as many participants including senior citizens, high school students and children as young as 9 years spread their joy and enthusiasm, making the event a great success. Held at the Morris Davison Park, the Walkathon kicked off at 10:30am with participants walking 5kms around the park, a flat, paved path. The walkathon came to an end with networking among the participants followed by healthy yet sumptuous breakfast for all the participants and some local performances.

The historic walkathon was conceptualised by AFNA to support Akshar Foundation's unique initiative of accepting school fees of “at least 25 plastic materials a week”. Akshar Foundation is an Assam based education NGO that recently made headlines globally for the innovative policy of “Plastic as School Fees”, wherein students are required to submit household plastic to the school recycling centre on a weekly basis.

Speaking on the occasion, Mr. Niren Choudhury, AFNA representative and the man behind this initiative said, *“This is the first walk-a-thon sponsored by AFNA in New Jersey and I am very happy to see the huge turnout. The fund raised and the turn out from young volunteers to senior most citizens of Assamese communities supersede all our expectations and made us energized enough to repeat next year in much larger scale. We are in debt to our volunteers and all the people from Bridgewater and nearby areas who supported us in this campaign”.*



Join AFNA at Assam Convention 2020 in Los Angeles

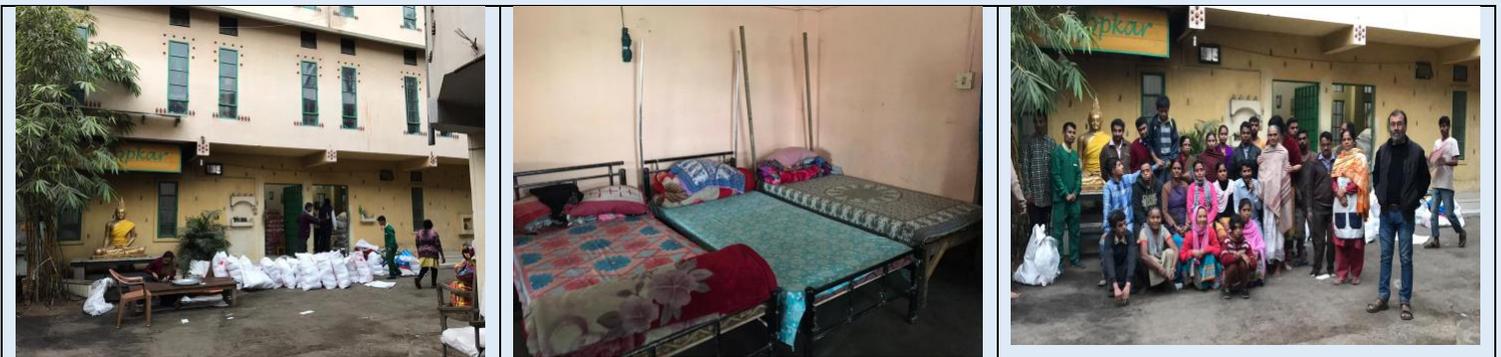
By Debojit Bora

We will be holding our annual General Body meeting during the Assam Convention to share our projects and hold our annual fundraising. We hope to see you there and look forward to your continued support. The GBM will be reporting on our work over the year and how your support made it possible for so many people in need in Assam to have improved lives. You can register for the convention and find out more about the details of events, including the cultural program, at the convention website www.acla2020.com.

A visit to Kalyani Niwas and Atma Nirbhar

By Sarfaraz Taher

I visited Kalyani Niwas in December and had a chance to meet their dedicated advisors, their administrative staff, their physician, and the kids with hopeful smiles. There are 46 girls below the age of 18 years with 35 of them as permanent residents of the home. They have a staff of 8 (administrative staff, counselors, cooks, security, care taker) for which the salary is provided by Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW), the parent organization for Kalyani Niwas. Kalyani Niwas is like the Assam Chapter of ICCW (https://www.iccwash.org/activities_girls.html). They also have some support from the government that funds the bare minimum food and the support of the facilities. The staff Kalyani Niwas is very dedicated. In 2019 we supported Kalyani Niwas with healthcare expenses for a physician's fees, medicines and hygiene materials for 34 girls under 16 years. Their immediate need is additional support in the area of medical care, and I have requested for them to work on a proposal about their current need for AFNA. Their next need would be getting support to provide better nutrition for the children staying with them.



I also visited Atma Nirbhar during my Assam visit in December. Atma Nirbhar is an organization that promotes self-employment for physically challenged. They employ about 50 differently-abled individuals and run a very successful packaging business. AFNA provided them with cash donation for infrastructure development, which was critical in the formative stage of the organization. They have expanded to the RCC building in their campus. I met Urmila Barua, their secretary, the on-site manager Mr. Jha, and a few other employees. They are contemplating adding a lift to the facility and said they will need AFNA's help. I hope to connect them to Mr. Kumud Kalita of Tapoban, who built a lift with AFNA's support. Please see pictures from that visit below. It is humbling to see the good work that AFNA is doing, and we need to continue to do.

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“Weaving for Care” Drive 2019

By Kamalakshi Hazarika

The “Weaving for Care” drive is an initiative started by the Assam Foundation of North America to donate handmade items to charity. Under this initiative, adults and children are invited to weave or knit a clothing item to donate. All children who participate will be awarded a certificate for volunteering hours. The items donated in the 2019 drive included hats, scarves, sweaters, booties, and children’s items. We thank Sarfaraz Taher, the AFNA president, for accepting this initiative and the AFNA Director, Enakshi Baruah, for her guidance. We sincerely thank - the “Care to Knit” organization which is located in New York, for receiving our donations. We also thank Sri Debojit Borah and the many participants from the West Coast of the USA, who sent donation items for charity. We would like to express our gratitude toward everyone who showed interest and helped us in this endeavor. We hope to remember our tradition of weaving again this year and continue to provide comfort for the winter.



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A visit to RVC in Akajan, Dhemaji

By Pallav Saikia

On December 31st, 2019, I made a trip to Akajan (অকাজান), in Dhemaji district to see the RVC (Rural Volunteer Centre). The 7 hours round trip was totally worth it. I spent almost 5 hours there, talking to folks in the RVC office and then went to one of the villages to see their work (30km away, last 5km is almost no road, the jeep went over bushes, fields). It is a very well managed and organized team with a strong presence in the community. Their office is in the middle of the village, in an old cremation ground donated by the community. They ran a small hospital in the compound long back and stopped when the government finally set up hospitals nearby. However, they still run a self-funded school(K-10) for mostly remote boarding students. They are into advocacy, community building, and disaster resilience, and are a key resource group for whom the district administrations of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, and Majuli rely on a lot. Additionally, they are engaged to prepare detailed plans for the disaster management by the district and engage lots of social worker interns (I met one MS passed intern too) who carry out thorough research and community engagement. What I saw that was different from our other engagements is that this team relies on ground data and thorough research before sending out any plan, which definitely requires a lot of man power and can be seen as administrative overhead.

My visit to the village showed the involvement on the ground and awareness they have built in these remote villagers. I saw quite a few raised hand pumps in the villages while on my way to the site. RVC has been experimenting with their design for some time. One I saw was cleverly enhanced to a sand water filter and provided drinking water to the kids in the school. I also saw raised earthen beds and bamboo platforms. Some of them are for kids during the flood season called CFS - child friendly space, a concept I had proposed many years back. The villagers are more worried about the flash floods that have become much

more common in recent years. They were accustomed to high water, but the flash floods cause lots of damage. In recent years, the floods dumped lots of sand instead of fertile silt. Once the flash floods are gone, they also have no water to do any other crops, the water goes underground very quickly, and ponds don't retain any water. They were talking about having water pumps for irrigation. Unfortunately, I could barely see any young men in the village as they all went out to work in remote places like South India.



Another raised hand pump



Tarps seem to be a key item for these places

Flood Relief Project Phase 2/3 Update

By Pallav Saikia

In the summer of 2019, AFNA started a relief and rehabilitation project for floods in Assam, which was divided into three phases as stated: Phase 1 - Immediate Relief, Phase 2 - Recovery post the Flood, and Phase 3 - Long-term infrastructure work. AFNA launched the first phase of the project right away and has seen the impact it had on the villages in Dhemaji working with RVC. AFNA has now taken the steps to move ahead with Phase 2 and 3 of our Flood Relief, recovery, and resilience work in Assam. Floods in Assam are a regular event, and typically the sentiments are high to rush with relief work when the flood hits Assam. Unfortunately, not much is done upfront to build capability for withstanding the floods or rebuilding the life in the impacted areas after the floods are gone. When we started the relief work during the 2019 flood season, we were determined that we would work beyond the period when floods hit the villages. With that in mind, AFNA has worked out a plan with RVC to better equip the villagers to withstand floods in 2020.

With an approved budget of \$7300, we kicked off phase 2/3 with a goal to:

- 1) Train 2 villages on community response methods when a disaster hit [flood is the regular occurrence, multiple times a year]
- 2) Build 3 hand pumps on raised beds for clean water supply during the flood [can be used rest of the year too, but an extra need during the floods]
- 3) Improve and adopt a design of a community toilet that could be used during high water level of floods

This will help us serve 2 villages in the Dhemaji district of Assam and gather data on what can be done to further scale this model.

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