

GLANCING INTO THE SECOND INNINGS: THIS SEASON OF LIFE

VASAVI SHANTI DHAMA

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It was a rainy July when we were assigned to visit a senior citizen's home as part of our college's socially relevant project. I went in expecting a normal week, nothing consequential. But all that changed when we stepped foot in the lives of the residents of Vasavi Shanthi Dhama.

The visit to Vasavi Shanthi Dhama, came out as a lifelong experience for the unsuspecting batch of SDMIMD students. It was a unique opportunity to share our love, warmth, and feelings with the elderly people. We started our SRP experience on Day 1 by just roaming around the community to get the feel of the ground. Soon after entering the community, we started looking around the houses, and that's when we met "our aunty", we noticed an elderly lady at one of the houses just staring at us, we went over to the lady and greeted her, she greeted us with a smile that could melt any stone, and as if she was expecting us to come. I personally never felt so at home with a stranger we just met. She later went on to tell us her heartbreaking story of how she ended up here in the Old Age Home, and then we got introduced to "Our Rathore Uncle". He was the quintessential grandfather that you have in every family - ever loving, and always full of stories. And the twist of the tale is that it turns out both our uncle and Aunty are in fact best friends and not married as we assumed they were, they met each other here at Shanthi Dhama and offered each other companionship

when their own left them. It was a complete bliss to witness how they lived together, happily and as a family.

Soon, 5 mins of talking turned into an hour, where Uncle and Aunty not only asked us about our families and our backgrounds but told their own stories and I felt like I was back in my grandmother's place in the summer holidays, where she used to narrate me all the stories of her life. And as duty calls, we had to get going to meet other residents for our project, but we promised them both that we will come back. And so we went on to meet other residents, and listen to their stories, and each of them left me dumbstruck. I am not accustomed to meeting so many elders all in one go. Seeing them all filled with enthusiasm, as if an old known relative had come in for visit, made me feel like I belonged. We generally got to know each other's names and interests and It was surprising how much they remember and how significantly present they are in the moment. Coming here, they have been given a new lease on life. From what I could make out, providing them with a home they can call their own has been a heart-warming experience for them, and yet we could sense a feeling of a void in their voices. The void of their family who abandoned them, and yet they talk about their sons and daughters and told their stories to us with such pride. With every room we entered, I was dumbstruck. Looking around trying to absorb every detail of their rooms while trying to listen and engrave into my mind the stories they told was really trying.

While concluding our Day 1 at Shanthi Dhama, as promised we made another visit to our uncle and aunty, and to our surprise, they were all ready and waiting for us with coffee and chai. This just made me realize that they had so much love to give, and no one to give to. And that is when we all realized that at least for the one week we are here, they shouldn't feel deprived of their own family or grandkids. And all through the one week of us visiting Vasavi Shanthi Dhama, we made sure to bring a smile to the faces of the residents. And all through the week, we spent an extra-long time with our Uncle and Aunty, and not only talked to them, but even cooked with them and for them, so even for a fleeting moment they will feel that they are not alone, and they feel listened to and loved.

when we spent even 10-15 minutes with them, listening to their life stories and enjoying a cup of tea with them, they said this was the happiest they felt in a long time and that it felt like they met their family. This also made me realize that we need to treat everyone with kindness and respect as we do our family. And that *what may seem an insignificant thing for us might mean the world to someone else.*

For me, it was an eye-opening experience with mixed emotions. I was happy and sad at the same time. The gestures filled my heart with warmth and joy. The feeling of being around them made me realize how grandparents are. I cherish the love and care I received in abundance. I promised them I would visit them again very soon as I don't want them to forget me and the bond I managed to make. This experience also starkly reminded me of my late grandmother, and how she loved us with all her heart, how much I still miss her, and the funny stories of her times.

The residents of Shanthi Dhama looked happy, but still, we can feel their pain of not being able to live with their dear ones. As Osho says, 'It's natural for parents to love their children. If children love their parents, it's extraordinary. And at that moment I decided to be that 'extraordinary'.

The elders at Vasavi Shanthi Dhama are connected with the same thread. Their eyes look heavy, having had a bitter end to lifelong relationships. However, this new family that they have come to know gives way to new hope. Holding onto each other, sharing pain, joy, love, laughter, and collecting, recollecting all that is left of their life

