

VOICES OF INDIA

By Brenda Whately

Leon Etchells
Class of 2003
UWCSEA 1996–2001

When Leon returned to UWCSEA in August to celebrate the tenth anniversary of his class year group at Reunion 2013, I heard about his project, *Voices of India* through which he aims to help empower the youth of India through innovative digital media. He and a friend began the project about a year ago.

Over that time, the two have travelled India, working with NGOs run by *Ashoka Fellows*, teaching children filmmaking as a means to overcome social issues.

He says, "We have been carrying out filmmaking workshops all around the country. We ask the children to discuss current social issues and then get them to write, plan and direct their own films based on one chosen issue. So far we've worked in 12 states of India with over 300 children and have helped the children produce 60 short films."

The organisations they work with select the children to be involved—up to 30 children per class, between the ages of 14 to 18. Their goal is to eventually train locals in the workshops in order to gain

a bigger outreach and allow them to target 1,500 children.

Leon brings to the project a background in film from the University of the Creative Arts, Farnham, UK. He first studied Advertising and Brand Management followed by a BA (Honours) in Arts and Media focusing on documentaries. His partner in the venture has a background in Social Education and Community Development.

A typical workshop runs for one week, Monday to Friday. It involves a visit to the organisation on Monday to show a montage of films made around the world followed by a discussion about the film industry. The children are then invited to participate in a simple camera exercise that is edited and shown to them on the same day. On the next day, the children are asked to discuss the social issues that affect them and the changes they would like to see in their country. They are also shown newspapers and asked to find a topic around which they do a role-play with one child acting as presenter and others acting out the story. On Wednesday they are taught some of the technical aspects of story preparation and storyboard, etc. In groups they then choose an issue and plan a film around

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Voices of India, Sholai



it, including costumes, location, etc. On Thursday they are given cameras and tripods and they make the films. With the help of Leon and his partner, the films are edited and then screened and discussed with the group on Friday.

Leon says there is as much follow-up with the NGO as possible afterwards, but because of their limited resources, this is often not as much as they would wish for.

They are hoping in future to work together with some of the NGOs to have the Children's Film Society of India screen the films nationally and to have a competition, with scholarships awarded to the best film-makers.

The project started with five cameras donated by *Video Volunteers*, an NGO based in India. They are currently

seeking sponsorship of their film project so that they can continue to grow it.

One year in, Leon says, "I can see how it changes some of the kids. In some cases they start out aggressively, but by the end they are listening and learning from each other." The team has recently raised about US\$3,000 through crowd funding and private donations. They currently pay for their own expenses while running the workshops, but their dream is to make it a sustainable, long-term project for which they would be able to pay the expenses of themselves and their volunteers.

Leon says, "I really believe I'm a product of UWC's education in social issues, helping people and educating for peace. I always loved how we were taught about so many social and environmental issues from a young age, before they

were even popular in the media. I have a lot of respect for the ethos and the teachers at UWCSEA."

After leaving Singapore to return to England, Leon has continued to involve himself in social issues, including AIDS awareness, helping to organise a Peace Concert, teaching English on a volunteer basis in the Maldives and now his film project in India.

Leon has many more plans for the future involving youth in India, including he says, "Campaigns against child labour, social humanities that we can implement in schools and more documentaries to expose some of the issues to an even wider audience."

For further information about *Voices of India*, please see their website at www.voicesofindia.org.

