

BY AARTI BETIGERI / CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

Kuku Arora sits in his second-floor office in a walk-up building in a crowded neighborhood of New Delhi, India's capital. From the next room comes the hubbub of a classroom of young children.

But Mr. Arora doesn't mind. In fact, it is all due to him: Arora has taken charge of

lege and another into a lifetime of begging, with no control over their respective fates.

Eventually Arora and his wife visited the girl's parents. A conversation that began with Arora threatening to report the parents to the police for forcing their children to beg ended with the Aroras agreeing to take care of the girl and her siblings.

"By the time we managed to get them to agree, we were surrounded by about 20 other children, all looking up at us with

KUKU ARORA SET OUT TO HELP ONE CHILD IN NEW DELHI. NOW 150 CHILDREN CALL HIM 'BABA' (FATHER).



MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN/STAFF

Garmentmaker and exporter **KUKU ARORA** educates children like Roshni (l.) and Firdose Malik, offering classrooms and tutors in two rooms in his New Delhi office. He and his wife have helped about 150 children over the past decade.

local slum children, and the young students next door now call him "baba," father.

Over the past decade, Arora and his wife have brought about 150 children under their wing, bypassing aid groups and government agencies and directly helping the needy.

In a country infamous for its corruption, Arora's story shows how one man can make a difference in the lives of many.

Ten years ago, Arora rented the property in the urban neighborhood of Saidulajab to set up his business, manufacturing and exporting garments. Soon he noticed a young girl, clearly a local slum dweller, loitering nearby. She was missing one hand.

Arora started bringing food to her each day. He would ponder the differences in opportunity between the girl and his own toddler son. He wondered how it could be tolerated that one child is born into privi-

hope in their eyes," Arora recalls. "They wanted us to do for them what we were doing for those three.

"We had to, even though we didn't know how we would manage."

Fast-forward a decade. Arora's patronage of children is flourishing. Operating under the name Sunshine Project, the Aroras have converted half their office into a schoolroom and built an upstairs space where the children can hang out.

The children receive meals and clothes, and bathing facilities are available. They go back home to sleep.

Dozens of them attend schools, both private and government. Arora finds the best opportunities he can for each child.

"I see a huge difference in these 10 years," he says. "Sending the children to school means they are more confident and actually have a future."

Arora has become an important figure in the community. By building relationships with the children's fathers, he has persuaded them to refrain from domestic violence against their children. "These are not bad men. I know them all," Arora says. "But they are ground down by the stress of living and poverty and turn to alcohol."

At times, Arora has felt buckled by the weight of what he's taken on.

"It has not been an easy journey; there have been days when we've had to survive with very little," he says. "Now we get some financial help from my clients, but many times I've decided I should no longer do this; I can't afford it.

"But then things happen that make me realize why I should continue."

Once, one young girl, originally from Nepal, admitted she couldn't see the blackboard at school, leading to her struggling in her studies. A cash-strapped Arora called around to family members to raise 2,000 rupees (\$40) to buy her eyeglasses.

"It was at this point I decided I could no longer carry on, and that I would announce at the end of the day that it was all over," he says. He was heading into the classroom that evening to announce his decision when the girl stopped him.

"She was wearing her glasses, smiling, and she told me that for the first time she could see me properly, and that I looked very handsome," he says.

Arora decided to keep going.

Another of his charges is 11-year-old Firdose Malik, whom Arora proudly dubs his "magic, genius girl." He battled to persuade her conservative Muslim father to allow her to go to school. It paid off: Firdose now attends one of New Delhi's most prestigious schools under a special program for underprivileged students.

"He's like a god to me," says Firdose of Arora, shyly. She now aspires to be a lawyer or a doctor. "I want to help poor people because I know how they are suffering."

"Kuku's work is very important. His idea is to give the children a happy childhood," says Julia Hillebrecht, a tailoring client-turned-volunteer. "The children love him because he takes care of each one and listens carefully to them. They know that he is giving them a great opportunity and [they] won't waste it."

Arora now is working toward incorporating as a nonprofit group, although he worries that the paperwork might swamp his time and take away from the grassroots work he loves.

What keeps him going? "When I see one boy, Umar, giving a speech in fluent German to a crowd of Germans, or another boy who used to sell vegetables accepting an academic award, it's their achievements that keeps me doing this," he says.

■ More at www.sunshineproject-delhi.org

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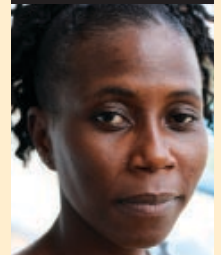
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