

*Love,
Laughter,
Life.*

Uncle Solomon

Happy Long Life To You
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HAPPY LONG LIFE TO YOU





About:

Shelter Trust

Shelter Trust is a children's trust registered with the Indian government since 2005. It is an orphanage home for children living with HIV or AIDS¹, known affectionately as Shelter Home.

The home is located in a rural suburb on the edge of Chennai, India. Its founder and director, Solomon Raj, juggles multiple jobs to financially provide for the children. Trained staff look after the children's needs such as food, healthcare and education.

Shelter is now home to 43 children. Currently, a second home is rented in accordance with local regulations and in view of the growing family. The constant need for financial assistance is clear from Solomon's tireless outreach to sponsors and organisations. He believes firmly in Shelter's mission to give love, laughter and life to their children.

*To Uma,
Shelter Home*,
and Uncle Solomon.*

* known as "Shelter Trust", its official name, in the pages that follow.

“Happy Long Life to You is a timely book. As the issues of HIV and AIDS fall off the world’s radar we need to be reminded that this is still a very real issue and it has not gone away, nor will it go away for a long time yet. However, we can make an impact. One recent development is to see children, who not so long ago would have died an early death, live happy long lives, when they are able to access HIV treatment, good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle. However, for those things to happen the stigma and lack of resources around HIV have to be broken. I challenge you to be a part of bringing hope to both children and adults living with HIV.”

— Rosemary Hack, Director of AIDSLink International

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Preface

The idea for *Happy Long Life To You* came as a passing thought during one of our conversations on a bus ride in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. We were on our way back from the last day of visit to Shelter Home—a home for children with HIV, which we visit every year as part of Project Naadi, an Overseas Community Involvement Programme (OCIP). 2013 was our second year in Project Naadi and we left Shelter Home on 31 December, yet again with heavy hearts. Shelter is a special place: full of love, life and laughter, infectious and inspiring. There were, and still are needs to be addressed for the home that continues expanding to accommodate more children, to provide quality care and education to them. We wondered what we could do practically to help Uncle Solomon, Uma, the caretakers, and the children, whom we have grown to cherish.

The stories that we have heard from the caretakers and the children motivated us to find means to alleviate the burdens they bear—the social stigma and the financial burden. What better way to do that than to tell some of these stories to the world? Uma's journey from being a simple girl in a village in Andhra to being the main caretaker for Shelter in Chennai is one filled with struggles and pain. It is also one that will shed light into the lives of young women with HIV in India, who experience abuse and neglect by society at large.

Three of us, along with a photographer friend, went on a 10 day trip to Chennai in May 2014. We interviewed every individual at Shelter extensively, including Uma, and had

a wonderful time with the children, like we have always wanted to.

Content for this book was drawn from the transcripts of these interviews and reconstructed based on our interactions with the children and caretakers over the past few years. To retain the authenticity of their voices, we have presented their words verbatim, in the form of pulled quotes.

We hope you hear their stories loud and clear, through our writing.

Elampirai, Kaymond, Nadia

Foreword

For someone who had lost hope in life, I am blessed with many things: a marriage, a job, a home, many friends and the children from Shelter Home. My family has rejected me but the world has not.

The children all around me are also HIV-positive and I am going to support them. I do not want them to be exposed to the rejection and discrimination that I faced. They might have been rejected by their families in the past but as long as they are under my care, I will not let them face any difficulties.

They must grow up well and be educated. They need to achieve success in their careers, they need to go to universities. I want to see all that happening. I still have health, my CD4 count² is good. I have many more years to continue the service that I have been doing. God will guide me through it, I am happy and satisfied.

My past does not bother me anymore, but I would get reminded of it once in a while. But what matters most is my children. They need to grow up to be well recognised in the society.

Uma, interviewed

I: Shelter

by Lyria

Aftab's tiny frame shuddered with the strain of suppression. He would not turn to face her, but Uma *knew*. She could hear his shallow breaths quicken. She moved swiftly between him and the wall, and caught the thin grey vomit in her hands as he retched violently, unable to subdue the waves of nausea.

“Akka, your hands... they are dirty again because of me.” Aftab's frightened eyes found Uma's in the dark. He was close to tears. Uma smiled and reassured him that it was all right, that it would be much better for her if she knew he slept comfortably on a clean and dry mattress.

She disposed of the undigested food and washed her hands carefully. She coaxed Aftab to take his third dose of fever medicine, even though she knew it would only be an hour or so before his temperature climbed back up. He would be tossing and turning, his shirt soaked in sweat. Sometimes, gripped in fever's delirium, he would cry out, writhe, pick at his skin, his sores.

Uma had already called the children's primary care physician, Dr Anand, but he would only be able to come in the morning. Sharing her concern, Uncle Solomon said he would take Aftab to the hospital. *Uncle Solomon should be here soon*, Uma thought. *He said he would take about twenty minutes. I don't think Aftab can wait much longer.*

As if on cue, three knocks rang through the house. Those raps! Uma recognised them immediately. She rushed to the

door and found Lakshmi, the kitchen help, opening the door.

“Solomon Appa!” Their relief was palpable. Uncle Solomon, founder of Shelter and Appa³ to its children had come for Aftab. He gave a few hurried instructions to Lakshmi, who would remain behind to look after the other children while Uma accompanied Aftab to the hospital. Uma cradled the feverish child in her arms while Uncle Solomon took the wheel.

They sped off urgently into the dark night.

∞

Nine years on, the Shelter family is larger than ever. Their home is now an open, sunlit three-storey bungalow. The house is lovingly painted in yellow, and views from it are breathtaking. Surrounding fields stretch for miles, punctuated infrequently by similar, unobtrusive houses. In the mid-afternoon, Shelter quietens as the children settle down to homework or a quick nap; this is when the countryside winds can be heard blowing serenely, nuzzling the children’s haven.

Today, however, the usual tranquility is broken. There are visitors from the city, and they are going down the steps to the common area on the ground floor, walking into a small celebration for Jeevitha’s birthday. Children throng them, screeching with laughter. The Shelter kids love having guests, and they love a party.

Jeevitha, newly 10, looks up from her cake. She takes in all the children watching her, and hesitantly makes a birthday wish before blowing out the candles. *May everyone be caring and patient and not hurt one another. That is all.*

She looks up and beams at Uma who is standing by her side.

Uma, better known as Amma⁴ to the children at Shelter, smiles back and joins everyone as they clap and cheer for Jeevitha. She looks joyful and relaxed, but in her mind she is silently considering if enough food has been prepared for both children and guests, if the children have all taken their HIV medications for the day, and if she can squeeze in some evening study time for the older ones taking their national exams.

Who should accompany Praveen Kumar to the hospital? Whose doctor’s appointments are on next Saturday? Is next month’s budget for medication enough?

Later, long after the end of the party and when the children have gone to bed, Uma gets some time to herself as the other staff at Shelter take over the household chores. Uma recalls the night when Uncle Solomon came to take Aftab to the hospital. She believes it was then that Solomon became convinced of the staff’s dedication to the children, and felt confident enough to entrust the overall day-to-day care of the children to her, a responsibility he had, up till then, been unwilling to share with anyone else. Now, Uma can focus her attention wholly on the children, with on-site staff supporting the running of the household. This is a win for everyone: the children receive unadulterated, 24/7 care, and Solomon enjoys peace of mind knowing that Shelter is in Uma’s capable hands while he works multiple jobs to raise funds for their home.

[end of sample pages]