

## Vanakkam Aikiyam Friends

We are happy to share this newsletter, which may give you an idea of the last part of the past academic year and our preparations for welcoming the new one. Four new class rooms, just completed, will give us the joy and energy to work hard. The campus had some masons and painters during this hot, hot summer to take care of the annual repairs to the school buildings. One of our teachers, Selvaraj is in the USA visiting different schools, under the guidance of Heidi from our professional development team and Jean Eisele, a professor of education and close friend of Aikiyam. The school office is filled with text books, note books and other stationery which we will distribute on and after 15th of June. Yes, the school will be quite ready to welcome the students on the 15th of June, which is the opening day of the 2016-17 academic year. I hope you enjoy reading this newsletter and many sincere thanks for being with us with all your support. Aum... Shankar



Four new class rooms and an Office



Finishing Touches

## Final Farewell

On February 29th, former principal of New Creation Bilingual School, Roy (Alistair Wicks) left his body in his UK home in the presence of his daughter and son, due to kidney failure. He was 92 years old.

In 1989, British Roy, a retired police sergeant and school welfare officer, visited Auroville and was approached by Andre Tardeil, who at the time was setting up vocational training opportunities at New Creation for village youth, and needed someone to coordinate the educational efforts there. A few months later Roy returned, and started the long journey towards funding and establishing New Creation Bilingual School. Over the years, Roy's house in New Creation became an organised and educative boarding for pupils of the school who had no relatives taking care of them. 'Roy's

Boarding' has been a caring home from where many young people from the village have been guided into the world with concern and love, an institution which survives today as 'Malarchi', efficiently run by Tixon and Vanitha, two of Roy's pupils who grew up there. (Vanitha is now a teacher at Aikiyam)

In 2001, suffering from a serious knee infection, Roy left for UK from where he had not been able to return. He had been always in contact, via email and skype, with 'his children' whom he dearly missed and vice versa.

A few days after Roy's death, Tixon arranged a small memorial service at Malarchi. At the front of the room there was a long table with a big picture of Roy in the center surrounded by flowers and candles. Mats were spread on the floor as far as the back wall and Mother's music played quietly from behind the wall for an hour.



Roy and his boarders in 2000 (Sathiya, Vanitha and Tixon are in the back row, second, third and sixth from left respectively)

During that hour, young people from the village, singly and in couples, occasionally with children, came in and sat silently with Roy in front, smiling at those present through the candles and the flowers. Heidi Watts, who met Roy soon after he arrived in Auroville, was there and thought, "how could one person do so much for so many? Long after Roy is forgotten the good he did will live on in the lives he changed".

## Professional Development

The professional development of teachers is an important part of the program at Aikiyam. This includes English lessons for teachers, workshops, individual mentoring, inviting experienced teachers from outside to join our staff for a given time frame, and occasionally sending teachers abroad for training, and much more. The following is the first part of a discussion with Heidi, Françoise, and Shankar about the history, and past and present challenges faced by those responsible for this program.

*Question: Heidi, when did you start working with the teachers at Aikiyam School?*

**Heidi:** When I came to Auroville for the first time, in 1992 I was invited to work with the teachers at Aikiyam, then called New Creation. I was only supposed to do a workshop with the Transition teachers, but the teachers at Aikiyam welcomed me enthusiastically. Their English was not at all good and my Tamil didn't exist so almost all of those workshops were hands-on. We played the games they could play with children and made teaching materials and had a great time.

*Q: What were the challenges you met then and are they different from the challenges of today in terms of the ability of the teachers to understand what you were teaching?*

**Heidi:** It's enormously different but it evolved slowly. Gradually their English got better and our understanding of each other improved so that I could introduce more theoretical ideas and we could talk about problems and successes. We did a lot of project work in the early years, working out how to do projects, and how to do presentations by doing them ourselves first. They expected to be told what to do but in my workshops, I expected them to discover what they needed to know by doing it, just as they should in working with children. We worked together to exchange ideas and their involvement was inspiring.

*Q: Today the teachers we have at Aikiyam are generally much better educated than the teachers we had when you first came. Does that make a big difference in professional development?*

**Heidi:** It makes a big difference in the classrooms. Now we have the luxury of being able to interview and hire teachers who have real training and we have articulated criteria for hiring a teacher



*Françoise, Heidi and Shankar*

*Q: What do we mean by professional development in Aikiyam?*

**Shankar:** Professional development at Aikiyam is making teachers aware of children's needs, and how to meet them. The teacher has to be not following what has

been prepared by somebody else as a curriculum without an idea of how that curriculum can be transferred to the children. Professional development involves creating an empathy for the age group so the children can deal with whatever they have to learn, and it also involves bringing in other elements of integral education, and not just subject facts. It's as if you have to create a club and that club will act as a learning community by itself. You have to create the learning community atmosphere within the classroom, from all levels, and that is why I call it integral. It's not just facts that are taught in these classes.

**Françoise:** For me professional development is opening ways for the teachers to progress. When I came here I saw there were a lot of steps to take before this could happen. There was a problem with English, which I thought was creating even more difficulty because we didn't understand each other. The first step was finding an English teacher for the teachers, and then making the time for it. Next I looked at the buildings to see what the classrooms were like. Was there enough space to move? Was there enough light and air? It was necessary to take these steps before working specifically with the teachers, and I am still looking at the situation in the same way.

**Heidi:** For me the term professional development is very important. It's different from training. As Françoise just said professional development is all of the things that one can do to help the teacher progress in every realm. It may be simply a matter of classroom management, or learning how to get information from other places and people. Development is like growth. It's not the same as learning little tricks and techniques. There are many different ways that we work on professional development. One of them is with workshops. Another is what Françoise and Shankar do as advisors to teachers. They work with an individual teacher on something that is particularly relevant to that teacher, and they work with the teacher on the things that that teacher needs to do to develop better. Advisory work is not wholesale; it's not about getting every teacher to teach in the same way. Part of our development work has been to connect teachers with other teachers both inside and outside of the school, to understand what it is that they need, or can learn from each other. Interestingly, resources are not a challenge. They seem to come when we need them.

**Françoise:** It is also very important that the teacher really sees the children, and we expect the teachers to answer to the needs of each child. When we work with the teachers we must have the same attitude. How I teach will not be how someone else will teach. In Transition the person teaching the class before me was doing it completely differently. I could not have done what she was doing, and she could not have done what I was doing, because what I did corresponded to how I am, but it did not correspond to how she was. It is also very important to know how to help the teacher do better what he/she is already good at.

*Q: Can you give some examples of what you just described?*

**Françoise:** I have been advising and working mostly with Shankar. We have been making an assessment of strengths and needs at the beginning of the school year. For two years Shankar and I asked ourselves what has to go better this year, and what steps are we taking so that it

happens. We had a workshop with the teachers at the beginning of the year where we looked at the material condition of the school, the children, the classrooms, and the relationship with the parents. The workshop covered all the areas of what happens in a school, and all the teachers were involved in the discussions.

**Shankar:** Some issues came up around homework, for instance. Do we have to give it or not? How do we explain the homework? How much should there be? We also talked about classroom rules, about not having 12 or more but just two or three and why the children had to be involved in making the rules. The workshop was more like brainstorming. Whatever problems, we were facing, were

brought to the table and discussed with the teachers, and teachers gave their points too, so we worked together on bringing more awareness about what changes were needed.

**Françoise:** The workshop was not limited to what the teachers do in the classroom, it was about everything that is happening in the school. It touched on administration, the amma (cleaning woman), the gardener and the garden. The discussion was very rich because the teachers were bringing up everything. It was very wide, and this is something I think is important.

(To be continued in the next newsletter. )

### **“Aikiyam – A Place to Learn and Grow” By Visiting American Teacher, Sarah Loeb**

I am coming from Brooklyn, New York where I worked in a progressive middle school in Kindergarten to Third Grade classrooms. I recently received my masters degree in education and was enjoying my life in Brooklyn but was longing for a change. When I connected with an alumna from my masters program about her experience in Auroville and at the Aikiyam School, I knew I had to come and be a part of this community. It is hard to believe that my time working in the Aikiyam School is over. The teachers here have welcomed me whole-heartedly and the children have been so loving and engaged in all of the work I have done with them. It has been a joyful, active, and deeply gratifying experience to be a part of the staff at Aikiyam. I have supported teachers in the Kindergarten to third grade with lesson planning, curriculum development, and English literacy. I helped teachers think of creative ways of teaching and supported them in any areas they needed such as classroom management, accommodating students, and making sense of the CBSE requirements. I have also enjoyed working in the library with Vincent. There, I have organized the English books into categories so that teachers and students can find and use books more easily. Finally, I have done work on closely observing children using the Prospect Descriptive Review Process to better understand the needs of children. Sharing the review with the teachers was meant to encourage more close observations of children in the future.



*In the Library, Jayalakshmi, Sarah, Vincent Raj*

Aikiyam is a place where I was able to follow my own passions of supporting teachers and bringing different

curriculum ideas to the table. I was welcomed to bring my strengths and interests and see where it could go. One of the exciting things I have worked with teachers on is what we call “Choice Time.” During this time children can choose their activity. Teachers preplan the station options and make sure to have varied materials. This choice time can include puzzles, bookmaking, story reflections, science experiments, stitching, painting, and much more. Based on the children's interests, teachers and I tailored the choices to suite each group. During the water study in the second grade, we created a Choice Time of water themed stations. They experimented with sound and water, measurement, clay and water, temperature, bubbles, and artistic reflection. The teachers and I have had such fun working together to create these stations for children as we have noticed they are engaged and learning so intensively during these kinds of lessons. Furthermore, this kind of teaching allows for closer observation of children and opens a window into the child, their interests, and how they are learning.



*Second Graders working on water project*

I have also enjoyed the opportunity to work with students and teachers on reading groups and talking about story. Each morning I work with a class by reading books in small groups with children. This direct engagement in English stories has been a wonderful way to develop comprehension and spoken English. Teachers have been very interested in incorporating this kind of reading in their daily routines and it has been a goal of mine to make the library more accessible to teachers and

students so that they can more easily find books of interest to them and bring them into their classrooms. I have loved working at Aikiyam as it has been a place for me to learn and grow in my practice as a teacher. I am so grateful to have met these wonderful people and collaborate with teachers who are so open and interested in new things. The connections I have made here will last a lifetime and I am incredibly thankful to have been invited to be a part of this beautiful community. It has been a true pleasure.



Sarah working with third grade on pen pal curriculum

### “Wasteless Aikiyam” By Volunteer, Lea Gathen

Have you noticed the school's segregation barrels - freshly painted with clear writing and creative painting? Have you seen the lush green spots appearing in the field in front of New Creation, which was heavily littered only four weeks ago?

*These questions were asked by Lea who came to Auroville via the Weltwaerts Programme in 2009/2010 and returned to work with our students on waste management in early 2016.*

These positive changes in the school's environment derive from students' activities during “Wasteless Aikiyam” a small project scheme, which I conducted during the months of January and February this year with 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th graders. In my work I was supported by numerous wonderful people from Wasteless Auroville, Eco-Service, and Kuilapalayam Clean-Up and a creative arts teacher from Kalabhumi.

When I started classes just after Pongal we would first focus on Upcycling: 5th and 6th graders turned matchboxes into colorful pieces of art by covering them with waste cloth; 8th graders did something similar with books and 7th graders created garlands with stars made from waste chocolate wrappers.

After Republic Day followed classes on different waste materials and categories. We asked ourselves “What is the stuff that we don't want to deal with?” And landed with answers such as “Plastic, Paper, Organic Matter, Metal and Glass”



Lea with 5th and 6th grades after a successful cleanup

February came and with it the “Maha Kuilapalayam Clean-Up” which was organized by Eco Service. So we took up the subject of littering, discussing causes and consequences on colorful posters. On 5th we then cleaned the area in front of the school, collecting a total of 10 bags of waste, which were taken to Eco-Service after. Only two days after fifty students, Shankar, first grade teacher, Nava and I joined forces for the clean-up of the village. I was so impressed watching students being seemingly more motivated than everybody else and trying to segregate on the way.



After Clean-Up 7th grade started to redesign the school's barrels for segregation of waste and finally painted them with materials generously provided by Helgard from Kalabhumi. 7th and 8th grade then joined me for a field-trip to Eco-Service, Auroville's unit for waste collection and segregation near Kottakarai. At Eco-Service students received a full tour and participated in two hands-on exercises on segregating waste in twenty categories as well as to figure out prices for waste materials by means of scaling and weighing.

Rounding up the program teachers, and students planned to watch Srini's short film “Maatram” in Tamil and Neranjan from Eco-Pro planned to give a small training to the ammas.

With the issue of waste remaining present everyday on the streets of Kuilapalayam, I hope students keep solutions ready in minds, hearts and hands to turn the school and their village once more into a greener, healthier place for all.

You can send your donation via the Auroville International Centre in your country, or send a cheque made payable to 'Auroville Unity Fund', Town Hall, Auroville, 605101 Tamil Nadu, INDIA indicating clearly that the donation is for Aikiyam School, or you can send it electronically by going to <http://www.auroville.com/donations/> and following the instructions.