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## CHILDREN HELPING CHILDREN



Asahi Hoque among the children at the Sun Child Home in Dhaka, which is run by Distressed Children and Infants International. Photo: Collected

**Sakeb Subhan**

“I want to be a medical doctor working for the disadvantaged like my dad. I do have to keep bringing everything back to my Dad, my Dad is everything I want to be,” was how Asahi Hoque, a fourth-year student at University of Connecticut majoring in Cellular Biology and Human Rights, responded to a question about what she plans to do after completing her studies.

Her father, Dr. Ehsan Hoque, is the founder of Distressed Children and Infants International (DCI), a non-profit organisation which began in 2003 at Yale University in Connecticut, USA. Although based thousands of miles away, DCI's heart resides very much in Bangladesh, where through four programmes -- the Sun Child

Sponsorship, Orphan Support, Healthcare for the Underprivileged and Blindness Prevention -- it has benefited thousands of children and their families by providing education opportunities, skills training, preventive healthcare and pre- and post-natal care for mothers. In Bangladesh, DCI works in Dhaka, Patuakhali, Nilphamari, Feni and Habiganj. The scope of DCI is wide; it takes a holistic approach to children's wellbeing. "DCI's main ideology is that, through education and skill development, children can break the cycle of poverty and we can also prevent child marriage and child labour. We don't only focus on education, because if a child and family are sick, do not have enough money for food it is not possible for them to get an education. We really aim to provide comprehensive care; education, health, community development, because poverty and illness are multi-faceted issues and we have to address all of them to make progress," Asahi says.

Multi-faceted is an apt word to use about DCI's approach to solving the problems of Bangladesh's disadvantaged children. It is an organisation that runs completely on donor support, a large portion of whom are located all across USA. "It is spread mostly by word of mouth, which is really exciting. Every donor has their child or specific area of interest and they get updates several times a year.

Asahi grew up in the USA and has a life there, but she keeps coming back to Bangladesh, because through her work with DCI and her father, she has developed her deep-set love for Bangladesh, "When I am here, I don't feel like I am visiting, I feel like I came home." Asahi has been volunteering in some shape or form for DCI since its inception in 2003 when she was only nine years old, "My dad wanted to instil the importance of working for others in me and also wanted me to connect to his roots in Bangladesh. Because of his guidance, I started volunteering. I did really small things like stamping and folding papers, etc.

"Then, meeting the kids when I came to work in the field, one of the things that amazed me was that the children I was working with, despite the adversity and hardships that they face every moment, were so positive and resilient. They had the same dreams as I did. When I asked them what they wanted to be, they wanted to be a pilot or an engineer or an artist. And the sad fact is that they had the talent and potential to do all those things, just lacked the opportunity because by fate they were born into poverty. I understood how privileged I am, and I understood I have obligation to do something. As I got older I got more and more involved with DCI activities and now I am the Programme Coordinator. In this role my job is to match our programme directions to the needs of those we are working for and the donor needs," Asahi said while detailing the genesis of her involvement with her father's passion project.

It seems that the seeds of her passion were sown by the similarities she noticed between herself and the beneficiaries of DCI who, though worlds apart in geographic and economic terms, were the same as her. Interestingly, it was this same realisation that lit her father Dr. Hoque's passion to serve the underprivileged. Dr. Hoque suffered from congenital cataracts, and by the age of five had undergone several surgeries to restore his eye sight.

"After that, even though he wasn't blind, he was seriously visually impaired, so his doctors, his teachers and even his parents thought that he shouldn't go to school. But he really wanted to learn and get an education. However at school he faced many hardships; his nickname was 'kana' and other children would take away his glasses as a

joke,” Asahi related about her father's challenges. One would have thought that such childhood traumas would embitter a young person and he would avoid any subjects that related to his condition, but it was a testament to his mental strength, and perhaps an indicator of his future philanthropic efforts, that he went the other way.

“He was very determined; he got his MBBS and finished his PhD. But he was always, even when he was having such hard times, saying 'I am so fortunate'. He was fortunate to not be blind, to have been born into a family that could afford treatment. Throughout his education he was doing small projects, like giving mothers seeds so they can grow vegetable garden for source of vitamins, supporting education of children of his village. And finally, through this life-long dream of helping the children in his country, he created DCI.”

Small wonder then that Asahi has been inspired by her father, who even with failing eyesight remains now as passionate about the welfare of children in Bangladesh as he was when DCI first started 13 years ago.

True to the philosophy that formed the launching pad for the organisation, one of DCI's main aims is to create a tradition of philanthropy and global responsibility in future citizens -- the children of today. According to their website [www.distressedchildren.org](http://www.distressedchildren.org) -- worth a visit if one is interested in this worthy cause -- “DCI also seeks to connect American youth to less fortunate children of other countries, educating them about the challenges facing children worldwide, developing their intellectual capacity, and inspiring them to take leadership in humanitarian causes; in this way we hope to nurture responsible and compassionate world citizens and future leaders.”

The prime example of this is Asahi. “Volunteering has been in an integral part of my life and has been very empowering. Even when I was nine, I felt like I was accomplishing something. It opened me up to what I am capable of as a person, both personally and professionally. I know that if more people in Bangladesh got involved and more youths/young adults did volunteer work, took responsibility of the people around them, together we can make a huge difference. DCI, unlike other organisations is run on volunteer support. A lot of the work we are doing and the changes we are making are through kids like me. Children helping children.”

Asahi comes from a tradition of philanthropy -- her grandfather Dr. Shamsul Haque founded Rights and Sights, which is a partner organisation of DCI along with Diabetic Association of Bangladesh (DAB), BRAC, TMSS, Islamia Eye Hospital, MA Ispahani Institute of Ophthalmology, BIRDEM and ATN Bangla Television. But she has also bucked a trend because, contrary to popular perception about expatriate Bangladeshis, she has not forgotten about her roots and strives, with inspiration and guidance from her father, to improve the state of her countrymen from a far-away land. Asahi serves as an example for other Bangladeshis around the world, an example that those of us at home will do well to follow.

<http://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/children-helping-children-1206895>