Thank you to all of you who donated to Amarok Society in 2018! Across North America, we have worked closely with generous Rotary Clubs and individuals who’ve been inspired to change the world. Your donations have made a profound difference in the lives of thousands.

The Shadow of Bangladesh

In North America, completing an education up to the end of secondary school is normal and expected. Due to tuition and living expenses, post secondary education here is a very significant barrier for many. The situation is different in South Asia.

In Pakistan and Bangladesh, the biggest hurdle to education takes place in the lower grades. Secondary education has fewer barriers and post secondary education is affordable to many, since tuition is almost free. There are only text books and living expenses to consider.

In these countries, the poor education quality and high costs of the early grades make academic advancement impossible for many. Globally, 1 in 3 children is growing up illiterate. More than half of those illiterate children have spent up to 4 years in school yet the quality of their programme is so low, they still can’t read or write even a single sentence.

In Bangladesh, a child attends grades 1 to 6 in an overcrowded classroom for half a day. Teacher absenteeism is high. Teachers “teach” by endless repetition, rote learning, and children are assigned hours of homework from the first grade. Imagine trying to do hours of daily homework in a one-room hovel where your entire family lives, with your illiterate parents being unable to help you at all.

There are fees for exams, fees for transportation to exams and fees for school materials. During times of flooding, the poorest children may have no dry clothes and not enough food to eat. This weeds out many of the poorest children, but there’s more.

Some of the poorest students find ways to overcome all of this, but are finally stopped by Shadow Education, as it’s called. The Shadow Education system operates in many developing countries - Bangladesh, though, leads the way and there’s not a classroom without it. Shadow Education is how the underpaid teachers force a
higher salary. Outside of school time, teachers sell their tutoring services to students. To ensure all students pay for these classes, teachers include essential materials inside the tutorials – essential to pass the all-important exams.

As the poorest children are simply not able to pay for the tutorial service, they quickly fall behind other children in class and are shuffled first to the back of the room and then out the door – frustrated and humiliated, keeping the poverty cycle intact. That is, until the cycle is interrupted by an Amarok mother who teaches neighbourhood children.

Then everything changes for that child.

**Everything Changes**

Our Amarok Mothers continue to break the multi-generational poverty-illiteracy cycle by providing good education to these poorest children. The children then go on to excel in government school.

Many of the Amarok Society children have been awarded highly coveted scholarships, and others sit with top grades throughout the rest of their academic experience. Many of the first batch of Amarok children are now in university and others are graduates in education, medicine, accounting and business.

It’s not only the mothers and children whose lives are transformed by their education. One of the great joys of our mothers is witnessing their husbands and fathers change their minds regarding what they hold to be true – especially about women and girls. All their lives these men were told it was dangerous to let women get an education. Bad for the family and for the marriage. Now, these men are bursting with pride, extolling their daughters and wives for the wonderful women they have become.

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**Minu’s Dream Come True**

Minu’s parents loved her, but Minu was a sad girl growing up. She saw her neighbours and cousins going to school every day, but not her. Her parents couldn’t afford school. At 12 years old, she knew she was going to be married soon and dreaded the thought.

One rainy afternoon, their neighbour Taslima, (above left), asked to speak with Minu’s mother (above right) and father. They sat on the bed to talk.

After Taslima left, Minu’s parents told Minu the great news. Taslima would teach Minu and 4 other neighbourhood children, starting the next morning. Minu was over the moon with excitement!

She is now in grade 12 and looking forward to continuing her education.
A Very Proud Father

Nagris’ father, Rabban, told her she was wasting her time going to the Amarok School. He didn’t think a woman had any business being educated.

Ask Rabban his thoughts now, and he’ll tell you, "Nagris brightens my social life and makes me feel so proud she is my daughter. Especially when all the children call her Mother-Teacher. When I think of how my daughter is helping the neighbourhood children my heart grows big."

Disrupting the Neighbourhoods

Our mothers brought tangible improvements to their own lives in 2018. They held themselves to higher standards, and their new confidence had them testing their own limitations from finding new ways to help more people in their neighbourhood to meeting with local politicians to demand better services – something unthinkable even to the men in these slum communities not so long ago.

In Bangladesh, especially in the poorer neighborhoods, volunteerism is rare. At least, it used to be. Our Amarok mothers are so committed to serving their communities, you’d think “giving back” was somewhere in their national anthem.

The confidence their volunteer work has given them spread into every aspect of their lives.

During 2018, fifty-five mothers left their employment as housemaids and started working for themselves. Being able to leave work where they felt undervalued for work they created was like a dream come true.

Many have set up business or work alongside their husbands creating small businesses. In fact, over 100 mothers are now sewing and selling clothes or have established other small businesses as a way to earn income for their families. This has given them a truer sense of the power they have over their own lives and they’re sharing this newfound feeling of empowerment with their communities.
Meet Rimi...

Rimi was married at 16. Within a couple of years, she gave birth to a healthy little boy, Arafat. Less than 3 weeks later, her husband died of heart attack. Widows are scorned in Bangladesh, and Rimi had to move back in with her parents. A few years later, an Amarok School opened up in her neighbourhood and Rimi’s life was never the same again.

In addition to becoming literate, Rimi spends her weekends finding ways to help others and talking to neighbours in need. She discusses the challenges in their lives, like dowry, early marriage, violence, how to mitigate damage from monsoon flooding in the house and help to prevent household conflict. At other times, she reads newspapers and medicine packages to neighbours or discusses nutrition with them.

Keya, Revived

Keya was devastated when her husband left her. They had 3 children. She didn’t know what to do and fell into a depression, moving back to her parents’ place and sitting each day, stunned that this could happen.

Then, her sister-in-law, an Amarok Society student, invited Keya to come to school. She came alive with learning. She loved to learn everything, but she wanted more. She wanted to be able to take care of herself and children without her parents having to help her and hoped to some day move into her own home.

One afternoon she saw a fellow collecting waste paper and selling hand-made paper bags to a shop. Keya asked to meet with him and learnt how to do the same thing. The income she earns from selling paper bags to shops isn't enough to move into her own place, but it has allowed her to significantly contribute to the costs of her family. Now, Keya is considering taking a loan from the local credit union for a sewing machine so she can sell plastic bags in the market. Today, she lives with a sense of real independence and dignity.
Ruma the Surprising

Ruma went to school on a one-year trial. Her husband was convinced she was too old to learn, but she convinced him to let her prove herself. She’s done more than that: now their 8 year old daughter is excelling in a government school. Even Ruma’s husband takes lessons from her and is starting to read, something he’d never thought possible (learning from a woman and learning to read). Ruma makes various sizes of plastic shopping bags from fertilizer sacks, cement bags and other discarded plastics. Not only do shops take her bags, customers come directly to her to purchase them.

Meet Taslee, the Urban Slum Outfitter

Taslee’s husband makes a meager living selling vegetables by the side of the road. When she enrolled in an Amarok School, as with most of the other women, Taslee expected to learn how to read one or two things and how to sign her name. Knowing how to sign one’s name meant literacy to her – before she became literate. She got much more than that.

After learning how to read and write, Amarok helped her to enroll in a tailoring class. Rather than sewing clothes from material, she decided to buy cheap factory discards for children’s clothing.

She takes these home, fixes them with her sewing machine and sells them at a price neighbours can afford. She’s taught several other women how to sew as well, but her greatest delight is seeing little girls and boys wearing the factory-reject clothes she made.

Community Libraries

Several of our schools open up in off-hours to serve as libraries – open to everyone.

The libraries are simple consisting of one or two book shelves filled with books. These are very popular places for adults who have some literacy skills and for others with minimum or no literacy skills and looking for safe places to socialize.
A few of the Amarok mothers love serving as librarians, signing in and out books, helping people to find what they’re looking for, offering suggestions and generally welcoming community members.

People come into the libraries to read community announcements, browse through magazines and newspapers, or find past newspaper clippings that mothers have carefully stored in ‘news banks’ (organized binders with the most important newspaper clippings).

Many neighbours drop in just to visit with others. Others, like the women below, come at a set time for a study circle, to learn about and discuss a topic of interest to them.

And many mothers bring their children to sign out or look at books.

The libraries have generated a lot of good will in the communities and several neighbours have even donated books to their library.

**Contact Us**

Your donations make a huge difference to lives otherwise trapped in poverty. Please consider Adopting a Mother or donating in any amount.

If you’re a Rotarian, the Rotary Club of Cambria, California is spearheading a Global Grant. If you’d like to be part of that or find out more please be in touch with us.

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