Making the Difference

My life is the same as millions of others'. I'm a wife and mother to two great kids. I work as a sales advisor and spend my weekends pottering about in the kitchen or garden. But eight years ago, my "normal", Liverpool-centred life changed forever.

I've always donated money to various charities. But rather than just giving money, I also wanted to help people face to face, so I decided to look for a project abroad. On the Internet I read about an Indian organization called the Rural Development Society. I knew very little about India, but I discovered that people in Tamil Nadu, the poorest state in Southern India, were in dire need of help.

I talked it through with my husband Paul, but I don't think he expected me to go through with it.

Still, I sent a letter offering my services and within a few weeks received a reply from Manhoran, the chief of Ananandal village. In broken English, he explained how excited they were to think that someone would want to come to help them. My decision was made.

My husband was not enthusiastic about my going there, but he also knew how important it was to me. And, though my sons said they'd miss their mum, they knew it'd only be for a few months.

I booked a flight and wrote to Chief Manhoran that I was coming.

Nothing could have prepared me for my arrival at Chennai airport. The noise, the heat and the bustle was totally alien — as were the surroundings. I got to work straight away teaching at the small local school funded by the Rural Development Society, for six days a week.

Day-to-day life was a total culture shock. With no electricity or running water, everything was exceedingly basic. But despite the shockingly simple life, not for one moment did I regret going. The kindness of the villagers was all-encompassing. In return for me showing them respect for their culture, they gave me their all. My Hindi was awful, but we communicated with smiles, laughter and hugs.

From arriving in a desolate village full of strangers, they'd become my friends. I started to look at the place with the utmost affection. And despite looking forward to my trip back to Liverpool, it felt like home.

I started teaching the village children the alphabet under the tree by the hut. Every day more and more children turned up. It was soon impossible for me to manage on my own. I found a local teacher and we started to share evening classes. We settled into a routine, splitting them into groups of older and younger children — named my Little and Big Darlings.

The day before the end of my three-month stay, I was overwhelmed when 2,000 villagers begged me to stay and continue with the school. There was no way I could remain there — I missed my husband and children. But I promised to be back.

My husband was incredibly proud of how far we'd come, but never felt the urge to visit Ananandal. He and our sons prefer to stay at home and help raise money for the school over here.

Since then the school has got bigger and bigger and now we have 500 pupils. The best thing is that the school recently came second in the annual exams of the whole of Southern India. I've thought about going to live there, but my life, my job and family are in England so I'm happy just visiting.

When I'm back in Liverpool people say how proud I must be of myself. To a certain extent I am. But I'm more proud of my Little and Big Darlings who come to school every day with a smile, desperate to learn. They're the inspiration, not me.

What are the author's plans for the future?

1. To visit her school in Ananandal as often as possible.
2. To stay in England and raise money for the school.
3. To move to India with her family.
4. Not to leave India any more.