

TEEN RETURNS FROM PROGRAM IN INDIA



PAUL BERSEBACH/SUN POST NEWS

BACK HOME: Jena Sussex, who wants to be a doctor, worked in India's medical facilities.

Aspiring to help others

During her trip to India with Projects Abroad, Jena Sussex says she's no longer squeamish about certain things in the medical profession. It's seeing others in pain that hurts.



INDIA: Jena Sussex, of San Clemente, with a newborn baby at the Mathi Clinic in Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu, India.

By **ANDREW GOOD**
SUN POST NEWS

Ever since she was eight, Jena Sussex wanted to be a doctor. Talk to her about her future now that she's returned from India, where she earned hands-on experience touring medical facilities with an international service program, and you know her mind's made up.

"I've decided from this trip," she says, her eyes alight from the 16-day adventure, which started Aug. 5. Trav-

MORE INFO
For more info on Projects Abroad, visit www.projects-abroad.org, or call their toll-free number at (888) 839-3535.

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eling from one coast of southern India to the other, she visited small towns like Sivakasi and the wilderness preserve in Thekkady. Along the way, she helped care for a newborn, sat in on surgeries, and spent time in a leprosy clinic, whose patients are often ostracized because of their disease.

Now a junior at San Clemente High, Sussex has always had an interest in other cultures, says her mother, Claire. Earlier this year, she and a friend organized a public viewing of a documentary on the ongoing Darfur genocide, and family vacations have included Costa Rica and Mexico in the past.

The desire to get away from guided tours led Jena to Projects Abroad, a program based in the U.K. that lets high school and college-age students work in various fields of interest: Journalism, veterinary medicine, and human medicine.

What sweetened the deal was the cultural makeup of her travel group - most of the other students were from the British Isles, meaning she was almost always among foreigners during the trip.

"It took a week to get used to

all the European terms, like 'jumper' for sweatshirt," she said. "But it was so much fun, and I made so many friends." The cultural exchange is ongoing now, she said; she plans to send her Irish friends a box of "Lucky Charms," ironically absent from their store shelves.

But the bulk of the experience was the hands-on work. Sussex learned that India's immense population makes it impractical to be a specialist, which accounts for the large number of general practices there. They still got to visit an obstetrician and gastroenterologist while there, and even witnessed an appendectomy.

While the doctors there are extremely well-trained, she said, they lack equipment: One ultrasound they saw could only be used to tell whether the baby was alive or not. Rather than disposable gloves, thick ones are sterilized and reused.

The opportunity to help heal was priceless. The leprosy clinic was possibly the most unique stop, considering how rare the disease is here. A common misperception, she said, was that those afflicted with leprosy are highly contagious, and merely touching them can infect you. In fact, leprosy is most contagious in its earliest stages, when no physical symptoms are apparent.

Because of its stigma, however, patients are often consid-

ered outcasts, and the care they receive is well-appreciated. In advanced stages, they lose sensitivity to pain, and often gain new injuries by burning or cutting themselves and not realizing it.

"(In India,) you eat with your right hand, but they don't know how hot the food is, so they burn themselves," she explained. "So they had to teach them to eat with a leather strap tied around their hand with a spoon tied into it ... they had all these inventions to help them live normal lives."

Watching doctors clean leprosy infections or studying tuberculosis X-rays isn't everyone's idea of a good time, but Jena says she's gotten past her squeamishness. The only thing that really bothers her is seeing patients in pain.

"They did this surgery and had to clean up infections without anesthetic," she said. "They were picking up tendons in (the patient's) foot and cutting them off, and the guy was moaning in pain. It was the worst experience ever. I couldn't watch that ... I'm not very adept at watching people in pain - it's kind of why I want to be a doctor, to stop people in pain."

In the future, Jena said, she'd like to be a pediatric reconstructive surgeon, repairing cleft palates for those who can't afford them.