

## People LESSONS FOR LIFE

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**People  
HEROES  
AMONG US**

"Charity has been integral to my upbringing for as far as I can remember," says Faiza, recalling how as a student, she spent her summer breaks volunteering at the hospital or nursing homes in Chicago.

# LESSONS FOR LIFE

UK-based Faiza Seth launched Soham for Kids, a Hyderabad-based school for the underprivileged, in June. Her secular outlook to life is reflected in this charitable enterprise **BY SANGHITA SINGH**

**T**he concept of 'giving back' had been instilled in Faiza Seth at an early age. Her mother Tasneem Abhasi – who immigrated to Chicago, USA with Faiza's cardiologist father and just \$40 between them – made frequent trips back to their hometown Hyderabad to distribute pro-

visions to needy children. Faiza accompanied her mother on one of these trips, and it was then the idea of setting up something permanent for these children first came to her. "The donations we made, while improving the lives of these children for a while, didn't change things forever," says the 32-year-

old entrepreneur, who is currently based in London. "I wanted to start my own school, where I could give children clothing, food, and most importantly, an education."

Soham for Kids, inaugurated this June, is based on the premise that for these underprivileged or orphaned children, a good, secular

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education is the first step towards self-reliance. "As an old Chinese proverb goes, 'Give a man a fish, you have fed him for today; teach a man to fish and you have fed him for a lifetime'," says Faiza, who has partnered with the Hope Foundation (a subsidiary of Hope Worldwide) in India to manage the day-to-day running of the school. "Mark and Nadine Templer and their wonderful Hope team were very excited to help me run the school in India," she says, revealing that Hope Foundation has experience educating 7,000 Indian children to date and providing vocational education for 7,000 young adults in India as well.

On June 14, Faiza, mother Tasneem and the rest of the Soham team welcomed their first 75 children into the makeshift school premises in Mallapur, Hyderabad. The children showed up dressed in their crisp white button-down shirts, blue-and-gold ties, skirts/trousers and blue-and-gold chunnis (for the girls), all designed by Faiza. The kids, aged between two and five, will all be educated till they reach Class 1 level, following which a new preschool batch will be recruited. "This is how we will eventually expand to Class 5," says Faiza who, though starting small, is determined to make a difference. "We eventually plan to expand the school to Class 12 and eventually find a permanent building to move the school to, with dorms that can also house orphans who study there."

Though CEO of Casa Forma, a property development and interior design business headquartered in London, Faiza dedicates a few hours daily to work on creating awareness and fundraising for Soham. "My cousin Nusrat Abbasi is one of the teachers and I am in constant touch with both Nadine and Nusrat regarding the school," she says, adding, "I worked with the developer to design the website myself." Currently, the school is financed by Faiza's personal income and she can support up to 120 children till Class 5.

Along with the school's growth plans, Faiza has also charted clear

"Just being with the children gave me such a good feeling that I decided to do something for them," says Faiza. Faiza's inspiration was her mother Tasneem (below, at the school launch on June 14), who made regular visits to orphanages and schools in poor areas around Hyderabad to donate hygiene kits, shoes, food and even cricket bats/balls.



“We want our students to become open-minded individuals who value people of all religions” —FAIZA SETH

guidelines for the kind of education she wants to give these children. "When we started, I felt that (existing) schools (we visited in Hyderabad) were divided on the basis of religion. At Soham, we will give them a secular education. Established religion is something they can all learn at home," says Faiza, who considers Soham an alternative to religion-based charitable schools. "We want our students to become open-minded individuals who value all people regardless of religion," she says.

Her life has been a testament to that belief — though raised in a conservative and devout Muslim family, at 21 she defied tradition and married college sweetheart Pallak Seth, vice-chairman of the \$500 million House of Pearl Fashions and PearlPet heir. "We've been married 12 years and religion has never become an issue. We celebrate Diwali, Eid and Christmas," says Faiza, who has an MBA from Stanford. "All religions teach



you the same thing. I do my Arabic prayers and observe Ramzan — but all that is more about disciplining my soul," she adds. At the school, she hopes to implement an American-style curriculum where children will learn by application and not by rote. "We don't shun religion. But we would rather focus on teaching children skills they need to get jobs."

Faiza is encouraged by the response to the school, having had to increase her initial headcount of 50 to 75 in keeping with the demand. "Initially parents were reluctant to send their children because they couldn't understand why anyone would want to help them for free," she says, adding, "When they saw how happy and healthy our students look, they wanted to enrol their children as well," she says. ●

A PEOPLE HERO is one who is elevated from ordinary to extraordinary by actions which are both noble and inspirational. Know a hero? Email suggestions to [letters@peplemagindia.com](mailto:letters@peplemagindia.com)