

# Helping the Helpless

ST. XAVIER SOCIAL  
CENTRE SERVES THOSE IN  
THE GREATEST NEED IN  
KATHMANDU, NEPAL



A staff member of the Jawalakhel Centre looks after some of the boys from the centre including Ashok (in wheelchair) who was found on the street.

**F**EW JESUIT MISSIONARIES since Francis Xavier in the 16th century have left such a deep impact on a foreign country as Fr. Thomas E. Gafney, SJ, did in Nepal over a span of more than 40 years. An American Jesuit assigned originally to teach at St. Xavier school in Nepal in the late 1950s, Fr. Gafney founded the St. Xavier Social Centre to serve the homeless in Kathmandu in 1970. Surely inspired by St. Xavier as he boarded the ship that would take him many thousands of miles from his home in Cleveland, he was equally inspired by the unwanted, neglected, and needy people he encountered in Nepal. After decades of dedicated service to those in need, Fr. Gafney was brutally murdered in 1997 in a crime that still hasn't been solved. Fr. William Robins, SJ, took over as director of the Centre following Fr. Gafney's death and for the next nine years, until he was assigned to serve as principal of St. Xavier school in Kathmandu, carried on the mission Fr. Gafney had begun. In the winter of 2006, Fr. Norbert D'Souza, SJ, became the third director of the Centre.

*by Annie DiMattina*

St. Xavier Social Centre was born out of Fr. Gafney's desire to address a problem he encountered not only in his work at the school but across the country: homelessness among male youth. In 1970 he began to care for several homeless boys; he first looked after them in rented quarters but quickly bought the land and buildings that today are known as the Jawalakhel Centre, one of the three individual centers operated by St. Xavier Social Centre.

Jawalakhel, located in the heart of Kathmandu, has grown tremendously over the years and currently houses 70 boys as they go through local schools. The boys range in age from eight all the way up to 22. The Jawalakhel Centre requires all boys in its care to remain in school and their education is supported by the Centre until high school; most boys stay for 10 years until their schooling is complete. Besides facing the twin challenges of poverty and homelessness, many of the boys are also disabled—eight of them are mentally challenged and 16 of them are physically disabled.

After several years of looking after the needs of homeless boys, Fr. Gafney began reaching out to men struggling with drug addictions. "In 1976 Fr. Gafney, along with the help of a psychiatrist, began to treat drug addicts by offering them a place to detoxify," explains Fr. Norbert D'Souza. "They quickly learned however that mere detoxification was not enough to cure an addict, so in 1983 they opened the Freedom Centre as part of the St. Xavier Centre." The Freedom Centre allows men to stay for several months—an average stay is eight months—as they work through their addiction and other deep-rooted issues with the hope of complete rehabilitation of

the whole person. The goals of the Freedom Centre, which currently houses 28 men, include exercising a better awareness of self, developing better problem-solving techniques, increasing emotional management, dealing maturely with confrontation and competition, and fostering teamwork and cooperation.

A typical day at the Freedom Centre for the men, who range in age from 18 to 24, includes time for meditation and tai chi, housework, group and individual counseling, games, and evening sessions. Meetings with parents and with former residents of the Freedom Centre are also an important part of treatment. All the activities in which the men take part on a daily basis are carefully chosen to give them a sense of how they consciously and unconsciously interact with their inner and outer worlds.

The most recent addition to St. Xavier Social Centre, the Nakhipot Farm Centre was designed to assist handicapped, poor, and ill men—including those with serious diseases such as tuberculosis, cancer, polio, diabetes, epilepsy, and mental illness—who need housing, food, and medicine. Fr. D'Souza comments, "Depending on their condition, the men are taught income-generating skills such as chalk making, envelope preparing, rope making, and poultry farming." The 25 men who currently reside at this Centre not only learn income-generating skills but are placed with organizations that provide them with jobs so they can be self-sufficient. They are allowed to stay at the Centre as long as they work to become self-sufficient.

St. Xavier's Social Centre has served as a beacon of hope during a bleak and troubling time for Nepal. In 1996 civil war broke out when communist rebels in Nepal calling themselves Maoists began attacks against the government in an effort to establish a "People's Republic of Nepal." The war, which the Maoists call the "Nepalese People's War," has ravaged the country, killing more than 12,700 and displacing another 100,000 Nepalese.

While the government has maintained control

of primary cities and towns as the Maoists take over many of the rural areas in Nepal, Kathmandu and the St. Xavier Social Center have felt the impact of the war. Throughout the city, Maoists cut telephone and internet connections, block traffic, and "arrest" senior political leaders, journalists, trade unionists, human rights activists, and civil leaders. Fortunately, the fighting has left St. Xavier's Social Centre largely unscathed; the biggest difficulty it faces is getting some of the boys who live in the rural areas home for visits. "The political situation has affected the mobility of our boys to their communities. Most of the rural communities where our boys are from are seriously affected," Fr. D'Souza explains.



Fr. William Robins, SJ, (left) the former director of St. Xavier Social Centre and Fr. Norbert D'Souza, SJ, the current director, honor the late Fr. Thomas E. Gafney, SJ, who founded St. Xavier Social Centre.

Despite the situation in Nepal, the St. Xavier Social Centre is constantly striving to continue to reach as many people in need as possible. "We must grow and reach the rural areas of Nepal," says Fr. D'Souza. "There are many addicts in the villages of Nepal who need to be educated and treated." Current plans for growth include rural awareness programs, addiction treatment camps, and outreach programs for the physically and mentally ill.

Rooted in the Jesuit commitment to helping those in the greatest need, the St. Xavier Social Centre calls to mind the many hopeful Scripture stories of healing. One story in particular stands out: Jesus is preaching in a building when a paralytic man is lowered through the roof on a pallet held by his friends. After healing the man, Jesus says, "I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home." St. Xavier Social Centre models itself on Jesus by helping people arise from their "pallets" of drug addiction, poverty, and homelessness so they can build homes and lead productive, generous, and loving lives. "Empowering the disabled is our goal," says Fr. D'Souza. "Orphans are socially disabled persons, addicts are socio-psychologically disabled, and the physically and psychologically disabled need our care and support." ■

Boys from the Jawalakhel Centre are highly encouraged to participate in athletics. Here a group of them celebrate a soccer victory.

