

Children smile in the same language: Making a difference with assistive technology

By Bridget Ames

As I reflect back on 10 amazing days in India, I have but two conclusions: Children everywhere smile in the same language and assistive technology WILL change the landscape of possibilities for children and adults with disabilities in India. What began as a vacation to India in 2005 for Paula Goldberg, Executive Director of PACER Center, grew into a vision of possibilities eventually resulting in first a national conference on assistive technology and then the development of a model AT center in Bangalore, India.

This center is the first of its kind in India and will be housed on the five acre campus of the Spastics Society of Karnataka (SSK), a nonprofit agency located in Bangalore, India. Eventually a training would take place in which 120 pieces of assistive technology software and devices would be donated to line the shelves of the newly designated assistive technology center. It all began three years ago when Paula was invited to "visit" India with Paul Ackerman. After the

visit, a series of connections and conversations resulted in plans for a joint technology conference. Out of this conference, many organizations in India began to envision a technology center similar to PACER Center's Simon Technology Center.

In December of 2006, PACER (www.pacer.org) partnered with India's National Institute for the Mentally Handicapped to co-sponsor a joint technology conference. *The Indo-U.S. Conference on Information Technology Uses for Adults and Children with Disabilities* was held December 5-6, 2006 in Bangalore, India.

Paula Goldberg, from PACER, along with Gretchen Godfrey and Kristi Hansen, traveled with other experts in the field of assistive technology, such as Joy Zabala and Janet Peters. They traveled to India to share best practice information and current trends in assistive technology with parents and professionals there. While assistive technology is not totally unknown in India, the breadth and scope has generally been undiscovered. Assistive technologies have predominantly been available for people with visual impairments. Parents and professionals, out of necessity and inven-

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The SSK Assistive Technology Team in their new AT Center October 30, 2007. Standing from left to right: Shoba Sundar, Priya Rao, Anitha Suresh. Sitting from left to right: Rabidran Isaac, Bridget Ames, Geetha Shankar. (Not Pictured Gopinath)

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tion, have created some simple technologies, but widely undiscovered are technologies that would have an immediate impact in the lives of so many more people. Undiscovered technologies include communication devices, word prediction, text to speech, and more.

An outcome of this conference was interest in creating a model assistive technology center in the city of Bangalore. Many expressed an interest partnering with PACER, but out of the many interested organizations, PACER partnered with a non-governmental agency, the Spastics Society of Karnataka (SSK). Recently celebrating their 25th anniversary with a wide range of activities, the SSK (www.spasticsocietyofkarnataka.com) provides many services to children and young adults with disabilities. Assistive technology is the missing ingredient in a recipe that already tastes pretty good but, with some key ingredients, could be even better. Rabidran Isaac, Rehabilitation Professional and Occupational Therapist at the SSK said, "With some of our students, we have taken them as far as we can (educationally). Assistive technology will help us to take them to the next step."

Over the course of the next year, IBM executive, Kristi Wieser facilitated phone conferences with representatives from the SSK in India and representatives from PACER in Minnesota. Loose thoughts and plans began to take shape. Details were worked out and reciprocal visits were planned for myself and my counterpart in India, Rabidran Isaac. Passports were readied, Visa's obtained and plane tickets purchased. A journey would soon begin and lives would soon be changed.



Picture taken during Mary Pawlenty's visit to PACER Center prior to the Governor's trade mission. Standing from left to right: John Guthmann, President of the Friends of PACER Board; Mary Schrock - Director of Development, PACER Center; Kristi Weiser - IBM Client Director of Target Corporation; Valerie Pace - IBM Regional Manager. Sitting from left to right: Paula Goldberg - Executive Director, PACER Center; Mary Pawlenty - First Lady of Minnesota; Bridget Ames - Coordinator, PACER Center's Simon Technology Center.

I made phone calls, wrote letters, composed e-mails and conversed with many. Assistive technology vendors were contacted regarding participating in this new model AT center in India. The response was overwhelmingly positive and thus far 21 vendors have made software and equipment donations totaling approximately \$18,000 to this new center in Bangalore (See Table 1 for the complete list of donors). IBM India donated 11 PC computers, four Young Explorers and tech support for the first year of the center. IBM on demand volunteers from IBM India have also expressed an interest in volunteering at the SSK. As international interest and awareness of assistive technology has grown, vendors are making efforts to reach out to our friends in other countries. AbleNet is one such company. PACER Center and the SSK became the recipient of AbleNet's first interna-

tional grant. AbleNet is offering five such grants in the amount of \$2,000 each towards AbleNet products. The goal of the grant project is to reach parts of the world that have not been touched yet by assistive technology.

In October of 2007, I traveled to Bangalore to train select staff of the SSK on the donated software and devices. In a whirlwind eight days, I trained the SSK staff on approximately 80 different programs and devices. The staff receiving the training at the SSK quickly learned a vast amount of information in a short amount of time. Representing a variety of professional disciplines, they began to think about how the tools they were learning might impact the education of the students they worked with. As the training wrapped up, a three-year plan unfolded that includes training additional staff members at the SSK, developing parent trainings, con-

ducting individual assistive technology consultations, and networking with other disability organizations to make the impact of assistive technology felt at a local, regional and eventually national level.

The highly talented teachers participating in the training included: Rabidran Isaac – OT; Priya Rao – EC Special Educator; Anitha Suresh – OT; Geetha Shankar – Transition Special Educator; Shoba Sundar – Medico Social Worker; and Gopinath – IT Specialist (see Photo one). As they learned the variety of tools introduced, they began to think about how each applied to their area of specialization. They began to make it personal and identify children with disabilities that might benefit from the tools they were learning about. They began to become an assistive technology team. The training was, at times, overwhelming, but generally, training sessions were filled with enthusiasm and excitement.

Another note of excitement came when First Lady of Minnesota, Mary Pawlenty stopped by the Center for a tour and a visit. It was a matter of great timing that my training visit would coincide with the Governor's trade mission to India. In anticipation of the First Lady's visit to the SSK, Paula Goldberg, PACER Center Executive Director, extended an invitation for her to visit PACER and tour the Simon Technology Center to better understand the vision for bringing assistive technology to India and helping the SSK establish this new state-of-the-art AT center. The First Lady graciously accepted and impressed many at PACER with her warmth and generosity (see Photo two).

The First Lady's visit began with a traditional greeting ceremony where she was given a traditional bindi (red dot). Children from the school sang "It's a Small World." She was absolutely charmed by the children and the music they played. Participants at the ceremony were charmed by the First Lady's interaction with the children of the SSK. After touring the new technology center, the crowd was ushered to a conference room where guests made celebratory remarks about the new center. Mary Pawlenty spoke eloquently and passionately about the relationship between PACER and the SSK and praised the efforts of Minnesota representatives. She next asked Charlie Weaver, businessman and PACER board member, to speak as a parent of a child with a disability to the parents at the SSK. Members of the trade mission included Paula Prah from Best Buy. Visitors were then treated to cookies baked in the school bakery by transition students before touring the rest of the campus and visiting with staff and students at the SSK. Before taking their leave, I heard one delegate remark that "their time at the SSK was the highlight of their visit."

During my visit to Bangalore, I also had the opportunity to introduce assistive technology to a variety of young men with disabilities who had previously attended school at the SSK. They had minimal or unintelligible speech and very little but functional communication strategies. They were all literate or text-based communicators. They were effectively limited by their physical disabilities. The impact of introducing programs with features such as word prediction and text to speech

was immediate! It brought tears to my eyes to see the excitement in their eyes and to know that the future was so bright with possibilities. That is the whole point of assistive technology, making a positive difference in the life of someone who has a need. **Assistive technology has the potential to change the landscape of possibilities for people with disabilities not only in Bangalore but in all of India.**

As the training drew to a close, I was filled with awe at the many adventures I had squeezed into eight days. I will forever remember traffic in Bangalore, the wonderful Indian food, the similarities and differences between Minnesota and India, and the warmth and generosity of the parents, staff and students at the SSK. When I initially met with the staff chosen to attend the assistive technology training, I was meeting with six talented educational professionals. When I went through the gates leaving the school on my last day, I was leaving behind the six new friends I had made. Something very special was happening and it did not end with my return to Minnesota.

In November of 2007, a week after my return from India, Rabidran Isaac, Rehabilitation Specialist and Coordinator of the SSK Assistive Technology Center, journeyed to Minnesota to continue the training started in India (see Photo three). During his two-week visit to Minnesota, Rabi attended a variety of PACER workshops, met with local assistive technology vendors, visited with parent advocates and much more. Highlights of his visit include volunteering at PACER's Family Fun Day, celebrating Thanksgiving with STC staff, and visiting with Min-



Rabidran Isaac and the staff of the Simon Technology Center during Rabi's visit to Minnesota. From left to right: Bridget Ames, Tenley McDonald, Annette Cerreta, Rabidran Isaac, Katrina Weibel, Meghan Kunz.

nesota's State Assistive Technology Team. While in Minnesota, Rabi not only furthered his vision regarding assistive technology but he gathered information about parent advocacy, inclusive education and more.

The future of this new technology center is bright. The team at SSK continues to learn about the tools in their new library. Using Adaptive Solutions AT Tracker Plus the team has inventoried their assistive technology. Features of the program will also allow them to gather data and track usage of assistive technology. It will also help them track their inventory, especially as their inventory grows and they acquire more assistive technology. The 120+ AT items that they have represent the tip of the iceberg. As they continue to grow as assistive technology specialists, they will develop trainings and train others on principals of quality assistive technology services along with in-service trainings on specific tools and strategies. An official opening is planned for summer of 2008, at which time they will open their doors to other nongovernmental and nonprofit agencies who want

to learn about assistive technology software and tools to meet the needs of the people with disabilities that they work with. I can well imagine the impact that assistive technology will have in the lives of people with disabilities in India.

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