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Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize  
Conrad N. Hilton Foundation  
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The list of past recipients of the Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize is impressive: Heifer International, Doctors Without Borders, St. Christopher's Hospice, *et al.* The Ninash Foundation, although less widely known, shares with these organizations an essential characteristic: it has made extraordinary contributions toward alleviating human suffering. Moreover, the fact that the Ninash Foundation is a small grassroots organization makes its accomplishments toward this goal all the more striking. It is an inspiring example of ordinary people making extraordinary differences in the lives of others. The foundation serves as a poignant reminder of what each of us can accomplish – regardless of wealth or social position – if we have a good heart, a little faith, and the willingness to put our ideals on the line. On behalf of those who have given generously as well as those who have benefited enormously, it is a distinct honor to nominate the Ninash Foundation for the 2006 Hilton Humanitarian Prize.

### **Background/Origins**

The Ninash Foundation is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, formed in 1996 in memory of Nina J. Malhotra. Nina was a pre-kindergarten teacher, a social worker, and a counselor. She taught Hindi at SUNY Oneonta and helped direct the college's study-abroad program in India. When her own life was cut tragically short by cancer, her family created the Ninash Foundation to perpetuate Nina's goals and values, especially her passionate support for the performing arts and literacy throughout the world. Their mission statement is simple yet ambitious:

To mitigate suffering for the socially and economically disadvantaged within the U.S. and abroad; to provide educational funding to promote literacy among children and adults throughout the world; to assist the cultural community within the U.S. and abroad by providing funding relating to artistic education.

In addition to the primary one in the United States, the foundation has chapters in Holland and India. They have established and supported a number of awards, including several designed to facilitate study of music and drama in public schools, but the most striking project is the construction of three schools in India dedicated to educating the poorest of the poor. It is an especially appropriate venture: the poor and forgotten children of India held a special place in Nina's heart.

I had the privilege of knowing and working with Nina during the final twelve years of her life. Dr. Ashok K. Malhotra, her husband and president of the foundation, remains a close friend and colleague. He and I have had many long talks concerning the problem of human suffering, the importance of compassion, and the ability of ordinary people to make a lasting difference in the lives of others. I have provided counsel and support, designed the initial version of the foundation's website ([www.ninash.org](http://www.ninash.org)), served as narrator on a documentary, and traveled to India in 2001 and 2003 to witness firsthand the construction and operation of the Indo-International Schools in Dundlod, Kuran, and Mahapura. On both occasions I was overwhelmed by the depth of poverty, the magnitude of human suffering, and the persistent impact of a caste system that has been outlawed since 1950. Equally powerful, however, were the smiles and gratitude of the children for whom these schools represent hope in a world that seems otherwise to have forgotten or cast them aside.

### **Extraordinary contributions toward alleviating human suffering**

Whatever we may intend, social realities are nearly impossible to legislate. India's constitution makes discrimination on the basis of caste illegal, but approximately 160 million people classified as Dalits ("untouchables") continue to experience – on a daily basis – the residual effects of a system of social stratification that stretches thousands of years into the past. Prejudicial attitudes and practices are particularly prominent in rural villages such as Dundlod, Rajasthan. Re-enacting a saga that has been repeated by generation after generation, Dalits and their children are scorned, derided, relegated to the most undesirable part of the village, and forced to perform menial labor for pennies a day. They are often unwashed, hungry, and cold. In short, they are social outcasts in their own communities.

When students from SUNY Oneonta's Learn-and-Serve-in-India program visited Dundlod in 1996, they were horrified to find the children of Dalits walking along behind cows, waiting for plops of excrement. The "lucky" ones scooped up their "prizes" and hurried home where their mothers mixed the feces with straw, patted the compound into cakes, then dried it in the sun to sell as fuel. The students found that neither the children nor their parents could

read, write, or do simple arithmetic. Most had never attended school. The other villagers did not want their own children to be “polluted” by having to sit in the same classrooms as Dalits.

Deeply touched by the plight of these children, as well as the compassionate response of SUNY Oneonta students, the Ninash Foundation arranged to use a vacant one-room building, hired two teachers, and opened the first Indo-International School for underprivileged children. Dr. Malhotra, president of the foundation, made personal visits to the children’s homes to convince their parents (often just a mother) to allow their children to attend this new, totally free school that had been opened just for them. Many were skeptical. Why would strangers want to help them? What would they do without the income generated by their children? They barely managed to avoid starvation as it was. Some wondered about the value of an education in a society which oppressed its own. Others worried about possible repercussions from other villagers.

Sadly, their fears were neither unreasonable nor unfounded. A year after it opened, the Indo-International School of Dundlod stood vacant. The building’s owner caved to the pressure of narrow-minded neighbors and placed a padlock on the door. Faced with the prospect of disappointing fifty children who had taken the first step toward a bright new future, the foundation appealed to the influential royal couple: Raghuvendra and Ganga Singh. The couple was struck by the compassion and commitment of strangers from a foreign land, surprised by the Dalit children’s eager response and capacity to learn, and appalled by the callous insensitivity of other well-to-do villagers. They offered to let the school use vacant stables just outside the walls of their castle-fort.

Incredibly, that simple gesture transformed a near disaster into a bold new beginning. With four stalls, the foundation created more “classrooms,” hired more teachers, and enrolled more than 150 children. In the shadow of the castle walls, protected by the royal family, the school blossomed. Mrs. Ganga Singh became increasingly more interested in the welfare of these children beyond the Dundlod castle walls. Within two years the foundation persuaded the royal couple to donate a plot of land on which to construct a more appropriate building, requested Mrs. Singh to serve as superintendent, and began a fundraising campaign to support this new phase of the dream.

Shortly thereafter, a French businessman on safari noticed the children studying in the stables. He asked Mrs. Singh a few questions, then returned home to Europe. A few weeks later, he mailed a check to her for \$25,000. In his letter he explained that he had intended to use the money to buy a new car, but then thought about the joy he had seen on the faces of those children. Nowhere in his travels had he ever seen children who were so eager to learn.

Bolstered by this generous bequest, local workers were hired to start construction. In January 2000, students from SUNY Oneonta traveled with Dr. Malhotra to Dundlod where, along with students from University of Rajasthan, they cleared construction debris, painted the building, and welcomed the children of Dalits to a new school that had been built just for them.

The initial building was L-shaped, with six rooms. When I first visited the school a year later, six more rooms had been added, transforming the building into a square. The inner courtyard had become a playground. Watching children, who had once followed cows hoping to catch a plop of excrement, now chasing a cricket ball warmed the heart. The most impressive change, however, was found inside the classrooms. At each grade level, beginning with Kindergarten, children were learning to read and write in three languages: the regional language Rajasthani, the national language Hindi, and the international language English. By the third grade, they were fluent in all three and, moreover, had mastered basic arithmetic operations. They listened attentively to their teachers, participated eagerly, and demonstrated obvious pride in their studies as well as a profound sense of gratitude. Education was not an opportunity that they took for granted, for they knew all too well what it was like to be without it.

The 2001 trip in which I participated included several members of the Oneonta community. Chief among these was Dr. Alan B. Donovan, president of SUNY Oneonta. During a ceremony at the school – attended by a capacity crowd of local residents and regional politicians, as well as the royal family – the children who previously could only dream of attending school, participated in an event most children take for granted: a school play. Dr. Donovan accepted a proclamation from the mayor of Dundlod, presenting one in return from the mayor of Oneonta, declaring Oneonta and Dundlod to be sister cities. We dedicated a newly constructed library, computer lab, and adult vocational center. The library is designed to serve the community as well as the school. The vocational center, which focuses on education for women, is intended especially to help mothers of the children in the school develop skills that will enable them to acquire better jobs, and thus to better care for their impoverished families.

The school in Dundlod has continued to grow: in stature, in size, in quality, and in terms of its consequences for the community. There are currently 300 children studying in the elementary school. When the high school is completed later this year, that number will swell. The vocational center, which began with sewing lessons, has expanded to include English instruction as well as bicycle and refrigerator repair. Project Hunger now feeds 100 children, four times each week. Of perhaps even greater significance, however, age-old prejudices have softened and the school has become a source of pride for the entire community. Encouraged by this success, the royal couple has pushed for a series of economic and social reforms, including the creation of a new health clinic for those who

cannot afford a private hospital. In short, the compassionate philanthropy of the Ninash Foundation has helped transform, not only the lives of the children of Dalits, but the entire village of Dundlod.

### **Established record of achievement**

Shortly after we returned from India in 2001, a major earthquake devastated the province of Gujarat. Within weeks, the Ninash Foundation was there: surveying damage, talking with people, and formulating a reasonable, efficient strategy to provide assistance. Having heard about the extraordinary school for underprivileged children in Dundlod, an NBC news crew from WKTV in Utica, NY traveled with Dr. Malhotra to film the devastation and document the origins of the foundation's second school. Building on their success in Dundlod, the foundation chose to focus on a single village that might otherwise slip through the cracks in the relief efforts of larger agencies. After hundreds of arduous miles of heart-wrenching transit through rubble and ruin, they came upon the tiny village of Kuran, near the border with Pakistan. A poor village to begin with, Kuran had been completely leveled. Fortunately, as had been the case in Dundlod, the foundation found two kind and capable individuals who (a) were well respected within the community and (b) could reasonably be expected to oversee relief efforts.

As should be expected, the most immediate concerns of Kuran's residents focused on basic survival: food, shelter, and water. The foundation responded to these concerns, but did not lose sight of the fact that the community's future depended on the construction and staffing of an appropriate school. They agreed to provide materials to rebuild ten houses as well as a ten-room school, provided only that the residents supply the necessary labor. It seemed like a small step in a long journey to recovery, but it provided a workable model as well as a rallying point for other organizations. With the assistance of the Ninash foundation, the people of Kuran were one of the first to rebuild their entire village, a project they miraculously completed in only three months. Today, the school is flourishing, with 208 students.

Upon their return to central New York, WKTV aired a ten-part documentary detailing their travels as well as the work of the Ninash Foundation (April-May 2001). Additionally, the Indo-International School Project has been featured on *ABC World News Now* (March 2000) as well as television and radio programs in Holland and India. The project has also been the subject of six video documentaries and presentations that have touched audiences in Finland (2005), Japan (2004), Greece (2003), Russia (2003), Jamaica (2002), and Trinidad (1999). It was presented to the Dalai Lama as a "gift of service" at the Parliament of World Religions (1999, South Africa), recognized by the East-West Center for promoting U.S.-Asia relations (July 2000, Hawaii), and cited by the Templeton Foundation in naming SUNY Oneonta to its Honor Roll of Character-Building Colleges. To honor her humanitarian contributions as superintendent of the foundational Indo-International School in Dundlod, SUNY Oneonta awarded an Honorary Doctorate to Mrs. Singh during our May 2003 Commencement ceremony.

### **Innovation in program design**

Culturally speaking, one of the highlights of my 2001 trip to India was riding an elephant up the side of a mountain to the mirror palace near the pink city of Jaipur. Our guide there, Pushpendra Singh Rathore, was a descendent of the Rajput knights of old. He was a giant of a man and, as it turned out, something of a local celebrity. Unlike his ancestors who had carved their names into history with swords, he was an artist who had taken a special interest in recovering the lost and forgotten crafts of India's golden age. Specifically, he had received permission from the government to restore stained glass artwork in major monuments and palaces. Using original glass from the period, Pushpendra had achieved spectacular results. We admired his work and chatted with him about our visit to Dundlod. Gradually, as we gained his confidence, he confided that he too had always dreamed of opening a school: one where he could teach ordinary children the many things that he had learned about the history of India, about the value of hard work and craftsmanship, and about the technique of working with stained glass. Without such a school, he feared, India's ancient palaces would continue to fall into ever-increasing states of disrepair.

Both the social circumstances and Pushpendra's vision for a school differed substantially from Dundlod as well as Kuran. Nonetheless, the Ninash Foundation considered his request seriously. Pushpendra agreed to their social demands of providing education for underprivileged children, their curricular demands of multilingual education, and their insistence that he find a local donor for a suitable plot of land on which to construct the school. During my visit in 2003, we held a consecration ceremony for the site. Last January, the Indo-International Arts and Cultural Preservation School in Mahapura opened with an initial enrollment of 15 students. Graduates will not only better their own lives by learning a trade whereby they can earn a decent standard of living, but will benefit people of all nations by contributing to the preservation of these unique cultural landmarks.

As should be clear from this brief narrative, each of the Indo-International Schools is uniquely suited to the community in which it is located. Each is funded by donations raised by the Ninash Foundation, but is operated by

individuals who live in the same community as the school they oversee. In each case, the foundation has taken special efforts to create schools that become focal points within the community, serving as sources of inspiration and social transformation for an entire community, not just children or its most impoverished residents.

To continue the relationship that began with the exchange of sister city proclamations in 2001, the Ninash Foundation arranged for A.V. George, principal of the Dundlod School, to visit Oneonta in 2003. He met with faculty and administrators at the university, principals and teachers in the local schools, members of the community, politicians, and – of course – children. In the process, he learned valuable lessons about the American educational system and we, in turn, learned a great deal about people of his village. Children in Oneonta and Cooperstown had already been pen pals with children in Dundlod. As children helping children, they had also become an important source of fundraising for the Dundlod School. After meeting Mr. George and hearing firsthand about the differences their contributions made in the lives of others, these children were inspired to find new ways to increase their support. In Oneonta, third graders at Center Street Elementary School sponsored an evening of **India's cultural program** that featured crafts, music, dance, and food. In a few hours, they raised \$440 for the Dundlod School. **Through a similar cultural program, Riverside Elementary School also raised over \$2500.** A “Penny Drive” by students at Cooperstown Elementary School raised \$2000 for the new school in Mahapura, enough to build an entire classroom. As further evidence that children can be motivated by programs of compassionate outreach, even at an early age, Gavilan Peak School in Anthem, Arizona has adopted the school in Mahapura as a “sister school,” raising \$1400 with a “Quarters for Caring Fair” last December.

### **Organizational capacity and administrative efficiency**

With an extremely broad and dedicated volunteer base, virtually every penny raised by the Ninash Foundation goes directly to support programs like the Indo-International Schools. No board members are paid. Even the accountant who prepares the foundation's taxes has decided not to charge fees for his services. Moreover, due to favorable exchange rates, relatively small donations make big differences in the lives of others: \$850 will pay a teacher's annual salary while \$40 will support a child through an entire year of education (paying for everything from books and national exam fees to a school uniform, shoes, and socks).

As indicated above, the foundation is committed to establishing programs that help people to help themselves. Each school, for example, was built on grounds donated for that purpose by residents of the community in which it was constructed. Moreover, rather than trying to micromanage an educational institution from abroad (a costly, inefficient, and ultimately divisive approach), the foundation has hired local workers to construct and maintain buildings, local superintendents to oversee projects, and local teachers to instruct the children. They have purchased supplies from local merchants and deposited endowment funds in local banks.

### **Demonstration of long-term impact**

Indo-International Schools have made a special effort to provide education for female children (especially those in the Dalit/untouchable caste). This commitment is based (a) on the fact that these individuals face a more miserable lot in life than 99.9% of the human race, and (b) on evidence that education can change, not only the lives of these unfortunate girls, but those of their entire families and communities as well. A study in Kerala demonstrated that whenever a family educated a male child, that child got a better job and established a higher standard of living for himself (but relatively little beyond that). On the other hand, whenever a family educated a female child, she taught her siblings how to read and write, then continued to sow the seeds of education and change for her own children, her children's children, etc. In short, educating female children transformed entire communities. As a result, the literacy rate in Kerala rose to almost 100%. Although the Indo-International School in Dundlod is a mere nine years old, we have seen similarly dramatic effects on the community. Because wealthy residents were ashamed and appalled that their own children were not receiving the same quality of education provided by the Indo-International School (multilingual instruction, computer use, etc.), several new private schools have moved into the area. New houses are being built and new businesses have been started. A health clinic has been established for those who cannot afford a private hospital. Transportation, sanitation, and other social services have been upgraded significantly.

Although it is less obvious than the transformation for people in Dundlod, Kuran, and Mahapura, there is also a crucial long-term impact for the people who get swept up in the flood of compassion that characterizes the Indo-International Schools. The study abroad program cultivates altruism and a sense of community service in college students. It is an invaluable formative experience for elementary school children who have adopted these “sister schools” and committed themselves to raising funds to ensure their well-being. And the list goes on: an Oneonta resident created a program to donate nanny goats to poor families in Dundlod so that the children might have milk, a girl from England created a fund-raising calendar that juxtaposed pictures of the children in Dundlod with their

English counterparts, a woman in Holland has written a children's book about the school, a former SUNY Oneonta student was inspired to build a health clinic in Africa, etc.

### **Summary**

The Ninash Foundation is devoted to improving the quality of life for children that most of the world has forgotten or cast aside. Its programs have transformed rural villages in India, giving people hope, self-confidence, and the courage to rise above an age-old caste system that oppresses the poorest of the poor. It has also touched the compassionate hearts of both children and adults in various countries around the world, helping us to become more decent human beings in the process. A small grassroots organization, Ninash is a magnificent embodiment of the humanitarian ideal: ordinary people making extraordinary differences in the lives of others. For these reasons, I am pleased to nominate the foundation for the 2006 Hilton Humanitarian Prize.

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**Available upon request:** 16-minute video documentary created by Ian Whalen (a former SUNY Oneonta student who traveled with the Ninash Foundation to India in 2003), narrated by D.W. Shrader.