

## SUMMER BLOSSOMS – SETTING THE RIGHT FOUNDATION

“A person who is happy does not hurt others”- this thought was the inception of The Summer Blossoms, a home run, social initiative to connect young children to positive experiences in life. It was conceptualized and is run by Priyasha Sharma, an engineer and designer by profession who likes to call herself ‘a student for and of life’. Herself a victim of sexual abuse and a witness to economic and emotional instability at her home in her growing up years, Priyasha was looking for answer to one daunting question – *why do people hurt each other?* And only after investing more than a decade trying to understand it, she feels the answer is ‘unhappiness within’. And with this discovery, The Summer Blossoms was born – to lay the foundation of happiness in people’s mind.

At its heart, *The Summer Blossoms* hopes to reach out as an art movement; one that encourages and supports communication within oneself. To a layman, it may come across as an ‘Art Class’ but it attempts to do much more - to give students an environment where they can *explore and express themselves freely!* In doing so, it aims to create happier and better human beings for a better tomorrow, who will not hurt but care.

The Summer Blossoms started in Bangalore with four children, and soon nine more followed. Majority of these students were 9-14 years of age, belonging to economically weak sections of society, and encountering restrictive and regressive environments with physical and emotional abuse in their school and locality, as well as at home in many cases. These children were extremely prone to falling into bad company and habits, theft being a common resort. But Summer Blossoms gave them a different world, even if for a few hours – a world where they were talking about birds, bee, rain, water, sun and much more. And they were not just talking, they were also drawing, painting and creating new things – sometimes as part of an assignment but many times just to express themselves (Priyasha believes that Art helps people stay connected to their raw joyful self). And all this in a completely non-judgmental environment, where there was no fear of failure or ridicule. The classes tried to touch these finer chords of life which neither the school curriculum nor their families were touching, but which create some of the sweetest music in life.

The Summer Blossoms’s approach is three pronged:

1. Building Technical skills: Introduction to tools, how to use them (for now the class is centers on drawing, painting and related art forms), techniques, studying various artists etc.
2. Observational Skills: Priyasha feels it is important to learn to *observe* – of course it helps when you are drawing or painting. But it can do much more – an observant person sees not just the world outside, but also the world within; and this self-discovery is the starting point of life-long happiness! For this purpose, students are asked to observe a wide gamut of things - patterns on leaves, songs of birds, structure of a flower, life of a honey bee, types of music.. and the list is endless. They are also taken on nature walks or made to do custom activities in house for this purpose (make water holes for honey bees recently!).
3. Inner Creativity: There is strong emphasis that children express themselves freely. They are encouraged to explore and express their creative side. The conversations and exercises are also weaved keeping this objective in mind. Well this means the classes are always interesting with unexpected revelations – like one student aspired to be a

'Don' so that nobody could hurt him. His dream job has however now changed and he wants to be a painter.

Priyasha, with her husband Rutvid, ran these classes for one year out of a small room in their rented apartment house in Bangalore. Within a year, positive outcomes were visible. Students who came to these classes with negative bias towards other students opened up and developed camaraderie amongst them.

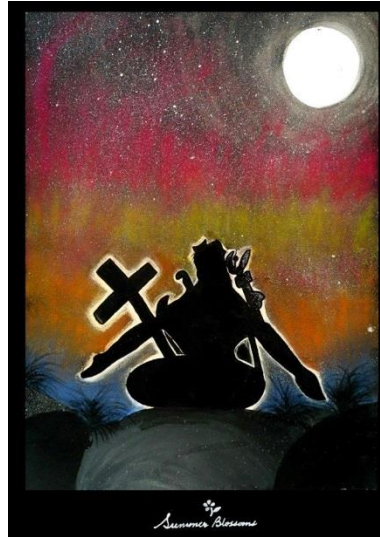
One of the students, Parag (name changed) was a ten-year old bully (liked to call himself "Don") of the street. He was involved in street violence, repeated thefts, constant bunking of school and tuitions, etc. A child with a history of parental violence, Parag in particular, was very unfamiliar and uncomfortable with affection. Parag showed a lot of positive change after attending The Summer Blossoms. He started attending classes regularly. From "I want to become a 'Don'", his 'ambition' changed to "I want to become a painter and paint with everyone". From being uncomfortable with even a pat on the shoulders, he started hugging, sitting closer and feeding others with his favourite dish - potato chips which he made by the kilo! Violence in the street decreased, and he became friends with the other Summer Blossoms. His confidence levels soared and he was able to perform beat boxing, solo, in front of a huge audience, in a public space, on a microphone. He developed his interest in painting further and some of his paintings found a place in an exhibition organized by Priyasha at Chitra Kala Parishat, Bangalore. They were hugely popular. Infact he has been offered to collaborate with a Pune based artist.

Another student Jessi (name changed), also 10 Years old, was a responsible kid from the start but was insecure, strongly opinionated, judgmental and a little lost in societal noise, with an abusive mother, and not a loving environment at home. He was petrified of making a mistake which was holding him back from exploring his talents. At this young age, he already had negative opinions and remarks to make against some other religions and refused to talk to children from those faith, being guided by his parents to do so. This child started to shed his religious bias after joining The Summer Blossoms and became friends with children from other faith – to the extent that he helped them in their studies as well. He staged a protest at home against violent treatment towards him by his mother. His journey with the paint brush is even more interesting. From a child who wanted to but was shy of painting a deer pink (because it is a girl's colour!), he went on to not just paint a pink deer but also defend himself from other kids calling him gay for doing so. Priyasha remembers his words - "Ma'am, I don't mind. Aren't gays also people?" He started enjoying painting and experimenting with colors and techniques - painted a series based on his favourite birds: Pigeons. His work started reflecting his confidence, openness, and playfulness. His paintings were a huge hit during Priyasha's exhibition.

Children attending these classes also became more sensitive towards their environment (want a proof? have a look at a 7 piece art installation completed by these young students <https://thesummerblossoms.wordpress.com/about/>). The class uncovered hidden master painters in some of them and Priyasha is in touch with some art schools to see if these talents can get a home.



13 year old John Cena's black peacock - because black can be beautiful too ( with reference to discriminations in society which manifest as judgements in day-to-day life)



11 year old Prabhaas's 'Shiva with a Jesus' cross under the moon and stars of Islam



14 year old Santosh's Ganesha - how there is a god in every child, and a child in every god

Be it the simple joy of playing in the rain or the caring act of getting an injured baby squirrel home to heal it, these children started to become more *sensitive, responsible and happier*. Priyasha and Summer Blossoms are a real-life example of how a positive difference to our immediate society can be made with such basic tools and infrastructure. All we need is a will to contribute.

Priyasha and Rutvid have quit their regular jobs and have now shifted to Bhuj (Gujarat), their home town, where they are working towards implementing this initiative at a bigger level and build a community in Gujarat as well, in their words' *based on sensibility and sensitivity*'.

If you are interested in starting such an initiative where you live and would like to get some advice, Priyasha will be happy to guide you. You can contact her at [ms.priyashasharma@gmail.com](mailto:ms.priyashasharma@gmail.com) or subscribe to the Summer Blossoms community at <https://www.facebook.com/thesummerblossoms/> and write to her.

The Summer Blossoms is a unique Art Movement that hopes to penetrate through the layers of insensitivity (both inwards and outwards), deep into the realization of oneness; one that makes you dance in ecstasy, with a mind that is still with silence. All of us are born with great potentials to become great humans, but what does it mean to be a great human being? What is humanity? What does being alive mean? This is what this movement wish for its students to explore. And what better way to start than with the creators of our future – the Children. After all, a caring, sensitive and happy child is a FOUNDATION WELL LAID!