

HOPE Qatar is a school that has actually provided hope to many differently-abled children in the country. With its emphasis on academics and life skills, it strives to help special children find their position in the mainstream world, finds out *Qatar Tribune's* Neeti Tarun Jha & photographer Santhosh Chandran



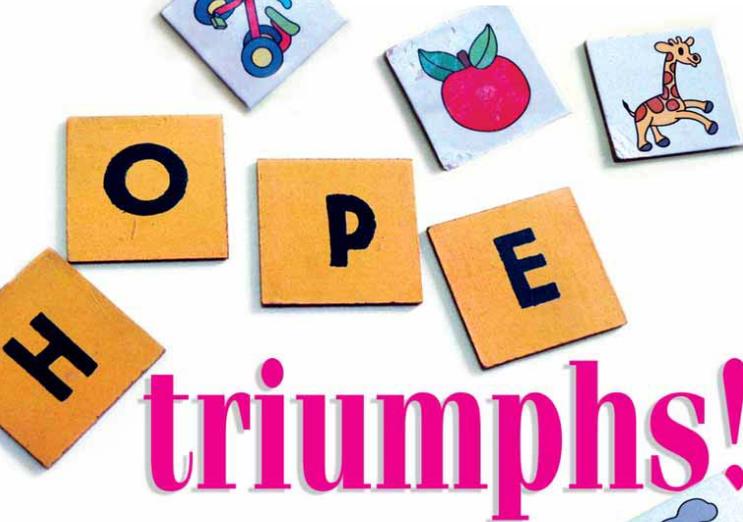
HOPE — a short word that brims over with positive energy, a word that gives people the courage to go on and not give up; a word that carries within itself the promise of better things to come. When hope itself can do such wonders, imagine its manifold impact when it's spelled out to stand for Help, Opportunity, Participation and Education!

This is the vision that HOPE Qatar started out with three years ago. And as with most success stories, this one too has an inspiration behind it. This was the time when a young Indian couple, Dr Ciby Mathew and her husband Rajeev Mathew Thomas were keen to plan the education of their child, nine-year-old Stevin, who had Down Syndrome. It was clear that mainstream schools, with their main emphasis on percentage rather than learning, would not be able to provide him with the necessary academic support. At this point, it was only a feeling of hope that kept them going. They met with leading social activist and legal expert Nizar Kochery, who joined force with them, and thus, emerged a school for differently-abled children. The support from the Indian Cultural Centre has also been tremendous, including affiliation of the activities of Hope.

As we enter the school premises at Abu Hamour, we see about 5-6 students happily playing with a ball in the compound, with their teacher, who is introduced to us as the supervisor, Sheeba. There's a lot of cheering going on as children take turns in kicking the ball.

When we enter the office, we are greeted by a smiling, young lady — the force behind hope — Dr Ciby Mathew. The coordinator of Hope Qatar, she starts narrating the story of how this school became a reality. "After we decided to start a school for children with special needs, it took us almost a year to get things started. A friend of mine who worked as an occupational therapist at Hamad hospital gave me great support. We started our school at the Indian Club premises, where the hall was rented to us in the mornings for our classes. We had only 7-8 children to begin with," she says. Today, among the 20 students, there are Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans. "We have many enquiries from parents of different nationalities. Unfortunately, we can't take in any more students right now as we have our hands full. We admit only 5-6 students per class so that they can be given individual attention by the teacher," she says. At present, the school has four teachers and a speech therapist. The school timings are from 8.30 am to 12.30 pm. They are planning to start evening classes on a consultation basis soon.

With its main emphasis on academics and essential life skills, it's indeed a challenge when one gets to know that hope has opened its arms to children who have Down Syndrome, Autism, Cerebral Palsy, hearing disabilities and learning difficulties. "After systematically evaluating the child, when we feel that he/she will be able to grasp basic concepts, we take the child in based on our strict admission criteria," says Dr Mathew.



"After systematically evaluating the child, when we feel that he/she will be able to grasp basic concepts, we take the child in based on our strict admission criteria."

— Dr Ciby Mathew

The students are then grouped together depending on their capabilities. The youngest child here is four years old, while the oldest is 22. The subjects taught are essential life skills, mathematics, science (a colourful chart showing a human body hangs prominently in one of the classrooms), English, computers, and fine and gross motor skills.

We request for a chance to meet the stu-



dents and teaching staff as well as see the classrooms more closely. We are readily taken on a tour, where we meet children — some shy, some suspicious, some outright bold and boisterous. We see students busy with their PCs in the computer lab. Ahsan is introduced as the computer specialist, while his friend Edwin is engrossed in playing games. Rinesh, who's the oldest student around, is typing away furiously. We are told he's working on

increasing his typing speed. At this point, Rinesh takes a break and comes around to chat with us. "I love music and I sang at the annual day function," he says. He adds that he loved Slumdog Millionaire and the Aamir Khan-starrer Ghajini. "But the second half was scary," he says. Rinesh religiously reads the newspaper and shares the day's news at the school assembly daily. Dr Mathew says, "Rinesh was in a mainstream school earlier,

but was having a tough time there. After coming here, he's happier and there's considerable progress academically too."

On the first floor, we enter the bright and cheerful Montessori room, with its yellow walls, a play corner, a reading corner with an assortment of books laid out, a giant jigsaw on the floor waiting for someone to come and put its pieces into place...

In the next classroom, we meet Arun, who is busy colouring a picture, totally oblivious to his surroundings. His teacher, Shahla Zaidi, says with pride, "His handwriting is so neat; his colouring is perfect. He's an ideal student!"

Another child, Ghanum is engrossed in putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Darren loves painting, and working with letters. On our request, he puts together the letters and makes the word 'HOPE'. Of course, after this he gets too excited and hugs his teacher with joy! Faizan meanwhile, not to be outdone, grabs a crayon and starts colouring, but then quickly loses interest, and runs outside the room. It's the kind of atmosphere where one can spend hours, simply observing the teaching-learning process taking place most effectively.

Today, when one sees the school in action, bustling with activity, students engaged in one activity or another, it tells the story of how different yet like-minded people came forward and worked hard to make it a reality. Dr Mathew says with gratitude, "We got a lot of help from Shafallah Centre, a leader in the field of education for children with special needs. They gave us the furniture and also invited us for the training programme. Also, our patron, the former ambassador of India here, Dr George Joseph was a great support for us. He was the one who suggested that we start Friends of Hope, a support group to help us with corporate sponsorships and other requirements."

It was one such corporate sponsorship, from HSBC providing the rent for a year, and various other initiatives of theirs, that made the day-to-day running of the school easier. "Our deepest gratitude to HSBC for making such a difference in the children's learning environment. In fact, we have decided to name our Montessori room after Charles Moncrieff, former CEO of HSBC, who passed away recently. He was a great source of strength for us," Dr Mathew says.

Hopefully, more people like him will come forward to help the school progress. But, what is it that Dr Mathew ultimately wishes for? "My goal is to see that all students from here are integrated into the mainstream. I want to see them well-settled in life, earning their livelihood, not dependent on anyone," she says.

With so much effort, hard work and best wishes in place, it's only a matter of time before her hopes find fruition.

Hope Qatar is looking for people to teach arts, music, computer animation on a weekly basis. If you have the inclination, please contact:

The Coordinator, Hope Qatar
PO Box 47243, Doha
Phone no: 3348611
Email: info@hope-qatar.org

