



THE
MALSAWM
INITIATIVE

a Journey

AGRIMA BHASIN

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THE
MALSAWM
INITIATIVE

a Journey



our
son
Malsawm
was
our
teacher.



MALSAWM ABILITY RESOURCE CENTRE, PEARSONMUN, CHURACHANDPUR, MIZO



Centre for
COMMUNITY
INITIATIVE

THE MALSAWM INITIATIVE

A SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS



Nestled amidst a green thicket on a hill in Churachandpur district, Manipur, in northeast India, The Malsawm Initiative (TMI) is a school that combines education and rehabilitation care for children with various categories of disabilities (ranging from autism, cerebral palsy, Hydrocephalus, Down syndrome to hearing, visual and locomotor impairment and multiple disabilities).



A Churachandpur based couple, Dondouching and Pauzagin Tonsing, founded the school in 2011. They began, they say, “with humble dreams” of a space where children could come together and learn. But never imagined that the foundation stone they laid would one day stand tall as the district’s first school for children with disabilities.



The journey began in 2005, when their son, **Malsawm aka Ginmalsawm** Tonsing, lost his eyesight to optic nerve atrophy (ONA), a condition that damages the optic nerve responsible for relaying messages from the eye to the brain. A lively and handsome boy with a sharp ear for music, Malsawm especially enjoyed singing gospel songs. (His favourite song was 'Amazing Grace'.) Malsawm passed away in 2016 at the age of 11.



“It is a daunting task to enroll a child with special needs in a school for the abled. For two heartbreaking years each morning I dropped my son off to his (private) school. I forced him into a world, which was completely alien to him. I looked on as he struggled to make sense of his surroundings and felt that I had failed as a father,” said Puzagin Tonsing, in his 2013 keynote at the inauguration of the school’s new building in Churachandpur’s Pearsonmun neighbourhood.



ds DAWN SCHOOL
LALAN VENG, CHURACHANDPUR

Motto: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.



Name : Gimmalsawm
Class : PREP "A"
Roll No : 31
Address : c/o Pauzagin Tonsing
Jlon Street,
Churachandpur,
Phone No. : 9862237692
Session : 2010

The holder of this card is a benefited student of Dawn School.
Headmistress



“We thought if he goes to school, he would start learning the basics and his social skills would improve. But he was not learning anything; the teachers at the private school he attended were clueless; they were only baby-sitting him. I felt bad for them because he needed time and thought but the teachers were not trained to accommodate his needs. What could they have done? So we pulled him out of the school,” said Dondouching Tonsing.



HERO

Like other parents, the Tongsings too wanted Malsawm to learn and attend school but their brush with existing schools in the district proved frustrating. In their six-year long struggle to find a reliable private or government school where their son could be educated thoughtfully, they interacted with several other parents and came across many a stumbling blocks.



The Tonsings discovered that:

- ▶ District officials lacked a basic understanding about the nature and causes of disabilities and this reflected in the low priority they accorded to planning and implementation of disability-related policies, schemes and laws.
- ▶ That teachers in both government and private schools were not equipped and trained to accommodate the specific needs of children with disabilities.



That the negative attitudes and behaviours of the larger society was the biggest barrier to the dignity of children with disabilities and their parents. While most parents, who had been living with guilt and shame, were reluctant to meet, a grandmother the Tongsings met was unlike any other. She was proud of her disabled grandchild, eagerly introduced him to visitors and even carried him outdoors for walks. This gave the Tongsings enormous hope and perspective.



In 2007, their regular meetings with the parents evolved into a parents' group that shared experiences, equipped itself with disability-related knowledge and resolved to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities across the town of Churachandpur. From identification surveys, health camps, counselling support for caregivers to campaigns for inclusive education in schools, colleges and churches: they advocated at all levels.



During that period, the Tongsings also enrolled for a distance-learning B Ed. (Bachelor of Education) programme. While they could not complete the programme, they nurtured a strong determination to start a school. With no money to buy land, they were ready to start a school under a bus shed. But in 2010, they found an ally and champion in T. Vunglallian (Founder, Lalpuithuail Foundation School in Churachandpur).



08.07.2011

A renowned educationist known for his large-heartedness, humility and his love of learning for children, T. Vunglallian (or **Pa Vunga**) offered them a portion of his school's land for free. With gratitude, the Tongsings remember that Pa Vunga not only trusted them with his land but also helped raise money for the school. A charity box Pa Vunga placed at the annual day school celebrations drew contributions from old and young alike. The contributions served as the "seed money" for TMI.



The Malsawm Initiative was thus born with contributions, donations, encouragement and prayers from well-wishers, friends and family. To build its 12x24 feet thatch and bamboo structure, parents helped with construction, locals volunteered as teachers and community members chipped in with chairs, tables and free water supply. Tyres were recycled into swings and locally available bamboo wood gave the school its first ramp.



Inaugurated in 2011 by then Governor of Manipur, the school soon evolved into a second home with a promise of freedom, friendships and dreams for the initial batch of fifteen children, who had been denied an equal opportunity to learn since birth. Now children could learn, think, play, err and not be judged. This motivated many other parents to set aside the social stigma and come forward for admissions at TMI.



As a result, the one-room school expanded and relocated to a larger and more spacious place of its own called **Malsawm Ability Resource Centre (MARC)** on a low-lying hill at Pearsonmun to accommodate more children. Throughout the life of the school, the role of the parents has been central to its effective functioning. Once, when a landslide blocked alleyways around the school, parents and teachers formed a human chain, with digging forks and buckets, to clear the rubble. The school considers the parents as partners in the child's development.



The five-stage admission process of the school includes, assessment of the child's disability, parents' counseling and orientation, home visits, case study documentation and preparation of the individual education plan for the child. At each of these stages, the school expects caregivers to give their 99 percent, without which, admission is rejected. The process, however, is sensitive to the difficult personal circumstances that many parents face.



“The parents of several children at the school are daily wage earners – small shopkeepers or farmers who labour all day on the jhum (shifting agriculture) hill slopes; others are single parents or aged grandparents. Many of them express a sense of helplessness and frustration and might even feel depressed. This often explains their behavior, which can be neglectful, overprotective and even abusive towards the child”, said Dondouching Tonsing.



To reach out to caregivers with empathy and non-judgement, the staff of the school (including special educators, therapists, counsellors, assistant teachers and volunteers) offer after-school counselling, therapy and home-based services in case of severe disabilities or single parent households. The staff also recognise the importance of routine in the lives of children and therefore rarely absent themselves.



A typical day at the school begins with teachers extending a cheery welcome to school vans that ferry children. What follows is a 'circle time' or morning assembly, which is led by a different student each day. The rest of the day is divided into four periods between 9 am -1:30 pm with a tea break in the middle for the children to nourish their bellies.



On any day, the school's airy corridor, flanked by three rooms on either side, is abuzz with children chorusing poems, songs and spellings; bent over notebooks or puzzles and peering naughtily from behind doors. High-fives to their teachers, joyrides on the swings, and surprise visits to the caretaker's room that result in teachers playfully tickling or chasing them are common too!



Based on the nature of the child's disability, daily living skills and ability to learn, the classrooms at the school are divided into four groups – the play group, functional group, academic group and the vocational group. Three other rooms are dedicated to physiotherapy, speech therapy and braille lessons.



The philosophy of education at The Malsawm Initiative emphasises the language of love, kindness and dignity, which, other than sign language, is the primary mode of communication between staff and children at the school. As the waiting list for admissions to TMI grows with every passing year, parents find themselves dreaming, for the first time, of a future that was hitherto denied to their children.



Also critical has been the school's sustained efforts in advocacy. In the past this has included, spot essay writing competitions for students, marathons where wheelchairs and tricycles share equal space with bicycles, petitions for a disabled-friendly Secretariat building and 'inclusive Christmas' campaigns to assert the right to equal participation at churches and festivals.



This has sensitised not only the public at large but also the members of the district administration and the Church. In the words of a pastor, “The Church stands enlightened by the humane efforts of the Tonsings.” In 2014, the district officials too yielded to TMI’s relentless advocacy for the constitution of a district medical board that could issue disability certificates.



The fundamental vacuum filled by TMI's determined efforts and positive outcomes over the years has encouraged its parent organisation – the Centre for Community Initiative – to make informed forays into other district-wide programmes, such as their village-based rehabilitation programme for persons with disabilities; Inclusive education project; Livelihood project and women empowerment programme.



In a district where even talking about disability was a taboo, TMI's efforts ushered in winds of change in people's attitudes towards persons with disabilities. As the staff dream of establishing the Malsawm Ability Resource Centre (MARC) that can cater to all persons – children, adults and the elderly – who are disabled, they are leaving no stone unturned to ensure that respect and dignity for persons with disability becomes a norm and not an exception in the district of Churachandpur.





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a journey

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and



centre for
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INITIATIVE**

inform • inspire • initiate

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