First, this trip would not have been possible without the support given to me by family, friends, classmates, and organizations, to help me realize my dream of visiting India. Without financial and spiritual support I would never have been able to make this lifelong dream a reality, and I am so appreciative. My journey to Kolkata, India with the other eleven Wake Forest students and staff, was everything I had imagined and more. The city is alive and engages all of your senses in a way no other place I have visited has. Despite its poverty, Kolkata is truly the City of Joy, and I feel blessed to have experienced that in many ways during my two-week stay there.

It was incredible to work in the ministry that was begun by Mother Teresa and learn from the humble servitude of the Missionaries of Charity and Indian employees in the homes. During our morning service sessions, half of the group worked at Shanti Dan- a home for women with various mental and physical disabilities. I had the opportunity during these mornings to work alongside the physiotherapists, helping stretch the women and assisting them with some physical exercise. I have no expertise in physical therapy of any kind, but the physiotherapists were good teachers and showed me how to move the women’s hands, arms, feet, and legs. I was awestruck by all that the women are able to do with the guidance of these physiotherapists!
With their, and our, assistance, women with frail legs and curled feet are able to stand. The physiotherapists have faith in these women to sit up, stand up, and even walk up and down the room. Many people would have written off walking as something some of these women would never be able to do, and yet here they are every morning—walking! There are no fancy machines or gadgets, no more than 30 minute sessions per woman, and yet the miracle of walking is happening every day in this house of solace amid the chaos of the streets of Kolkata.

From having the experience of observing and assisting the women of Shanti Dan in moving and walking, I have begun to reflect on the limitations I place on other people, as well as myself, and how transformative a power faith is. I learned to walk the streets of an unknown city by putting my faith in our leaders and in my own abilities to learn and gain acquaintance with a foreign place. I was filled with a faith that the work I did in Kolkata relieved the employees in some way and brought joy to someone. Faith is a large part of the work of the Missionaries of Charity. Mother Teresa had faith in her Lord that resources would be provided for the people she served on the streets of Kolkata and indeed she walked by a faith beyond what she could see. Beyond the poverty, illness, disability, and sadness, she saw joy, love, and the face of Jesus in each individual. I saw what a difference such faith, in God and in other humans, can have on the lives and work of others through this service trip, and it has deepened my own relationship with God in inexpressible ways.
At the conclusion of the trip, we had the pleasure of visiting the Taj Mahal in Agra, affording us an opportunity to explore another part of India and allowing us to tour one of the greatest wonders of this world. I had taken a class at Wake Forest dedicated entirely to studying the history and architecture of the Taj Mahal, and so three years later, there I was standing in awe at the magnificence of the building. It was such an “Oh my goodness I can’t believe I am really here” moment for me, and I just thank you so much for the support in helping my Wake Forest experience come full-circle. I learned about India and the Taj Mahal in books and classes, and for two weeks I was then able to bring that knowledge to reality and live in this other world. And to stand under the marble of the Taj, with its inlaid stones and semi-precious jewels, and remark on the truly incredible things that humans can create, through the resources and guidance of God.

My faith was strengthened on this trip. My ideas of service have been reshaped, to focus on people above all else. I feel as if I made true connections with people and gained a deeper knowledge about another culture. And on this trip, I saw joy beyond measure abound in the women and children I worked with, the nuns who guided us, and in my trip leaders and fellow participants’ exuberance in exploring and serving.

If you have any more questions, please contact me at oliviabwhitener@gmail.com

God’s peace,

Olivia Whitener ’15