



REACH OUT

Make A Difference



- Rekha Balgi

Meet, Rama Balgi (Girish), an intrinsic and integral part of Reachout and the driving force who hasn't missed a single event in last 25 years.

He says, "I love Reachout and wait for it always because I meet my friends, meet Mrs. Desai, make new friends, get a partner buddy, love the yoga sessions, art, dramatics, food, listening to Hansaji, the stroll, and lots more... and love The Yoga Institute the most. Waiting to go back for Reachout Camp..."

Guess what till we can meet again in person; We have figured out a plan, it's called **GIFT A SMILE**, which will cheer up every one."





Remembering the Divine before starting our journey



*Vakratunda Mahakaya Surya
Koti Samaprabha /
Nirvighnam Kuru Me Dev
Sarv-Kaaryeshu Sarvadaa //*

We salute our Supreme Lord,
Ganesha, who has a curved
trunk and whose radiance is
equal to a million suns. May
you bless all our endeavors
and remove all obstacles
from our path.



Foreword



We always knew that our Self-advocates with Down syndrome are friendly. But 'Gift A Smile' was able to put this characteristic to wonderful use. The Gift A Smile campaign looks at a new approach to create awareness and empathy – leaving no way for sympathy which is what many people feel even today when they see persons with disability.



Thank you Rekha and team for taking this amazing initiative to integrate persons with down syndrome with the mainstream without compromising on their individuality. As they say – *“it is the diversity that brings in richness”*. May this initiative grow and may we have a country full of buddies who understand each other and help complement this diversity.

- Dr. Surekha Ramachandran
President, Down Syndrome
Federation of India

Downs Syndrome Federation Of India (DSFI) is a prominent institution in India that provides empowerment, education, support and more to families of individuals with special needs especially Downs Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities. Dr Surekha Ramachandran is a visionary and a lighthouse to everyone who associates with her, being just a phone call away. Truly blessed to be associated with DSFI and there couldn't be a better space to launch our Virtual Resource Guide; GIFT A SMILE. Together we will celebrate Inclusion and make a difference.

Grateful, Rekha Balgi

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Disclaimer: This virtual guide, 'Gift A Smile' by Rekha Balgi, is intended to be a resource for information and support. All care has been taken to ensure accuracy of information provided. Those who initiate this project have to discern and use guidelines given as applicable for their requirement. Any error or discrepancy is regretted.

Copyright: Gift A Smile is a project launched from 4th May 2021 to 4th July 2021 during the REACHOUT silver jubilee year as one of the events by Ms. Rekha Balgi. Gift A Smile, a virtual resource guide is created and published by Ms. Rekha Balgi in July 2021. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted by any means without permission from the author.

This virtual guide has been designed by Darren DSouza | ThreeD Creatives

Introduction

Reachout has completed 25 years and is celebrating the Silver Jubilee event with a yearlong agenda of shares through videos of the journey, awareness inputs, collaborations with other NGOs sharing the same vision of Inclusion, testimonials, and lots more. Our last event was on 20th November 2019 at The Yoga Institute, where we had our usual mix of activities including yoga, dance, dramatics, talks, and more with huge participation. Do check out our [Reachout Page](#) on Facebook for details on our work.

Unfortunately, thereafter in 2020, the Corona pandemic started and life changed for all. We had plans to work towards our Silver Jubilee year, but things came to a standstill. The new normal led to a new kind of thinking about how best to get across using the online medium and we too widened our horizons. We started off our jubilee year celebrations from April 2021 with informative video shares and collaborations with NGOs The Dancerdowns and then Trinayani.

Gift A Smile

“Gift A Smile” is an idea that came from wanting to provide my brother Girish with a friendly call experience. He is very social and loves to talk to people, but usually only watches me do that or chats a bit with my friends. I used to feel bad seeing him self-talk or pretend to talk on an imaginary call and wanted to change that. So, I requested another sibling to call Girish and just talk to him. I recorded this and was rewarded with so much happiness, that I could see in him for days to come. Then obviously wanted to take it further to do the same for others too as per our Reachout Mission. Hence, we started Gift a Smile with 25 pairs of buddies to commemorate 25 years of Reachout and now we had 26 pairs to denote our onward journey.

We invited volunteers from our circle of friends and acquaintances and received a good response. Our volunteers ranged in age of 13 years and upwards, hence there were school and college students as well as professionals. Our group of special needs persons were 18 years upwards and involved individuals with Down’s syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism, multiple sclerosis, and so on. We created a WhatsApp group and got the participants to introduce themselves and provide information about themselves. This helped us to pair them up based on compatibility.



REACHOUT – MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The last year has been a difficult period for all. Every being thrives on social connections. This year we have all been deprived of it. Everyone has felt this pain. Nobody more so than challenged kids and adults whose sole social contacts were family members and school/workshop mates. Though many amazing peeps and teachers came forward and organized online fun and learning sessions, it's different when you have a one on one connection.

Gift A Smile was Born



Gift a smile was born. This is the 25th year of Reach Out - which has strived for Inclusion based awareness and acceptance since inception. Reach Out has come a long way from school summer camps to overnight camps in beautiful locales to camps at the Yoga Institute supported by an ever growing and enthusiastic bunch of volunteers. In celebration of the 25th year and continuing of her good work, Rekha Balgi lined up a few events/activities this year. First of which is Gift A Smile.

Together We Are Better!

The small team of 4 spearheaded by Rekha Balgi of Reach Out, Yojana Wavikar, Mangala Rajwade and Deepa Bhat reached out to and paired up 25 special kids and adults with 25 'buddies' ranging from students (youngest buddy being 13) to working professionals and managed to put a smile on 50 faces.



To the organisers' surprise, who were anticipating possible gentle nudges to get people started, people immediately picked up the phone and called up their 'friend'. Both self advocates and buddies came out beaming with ear to ear smiles after the first conversation; whether through a phone call or a video chat. This was thought out to be a structured and scheduled, once in a week connection session but then, friends don't need a schedule to call each other up :)



Rekha Balgi is thrilled with the response and feels glad we could provide a solace point for 25 challenged people and give them and their families a friend.

Written by Deepa Bhat | Poster Designed by Om Sapkal

Guidelines for Gift A Smile

1. Guideline – I

Reachout is about moving towards 'Us, We and Ours' from 'I, Me and My' and making a difference. Time is a precious asset we all possess and use to the fullest, but to gift someone your time to bring on a smile and happiness is a Divine Act. In giving it, you will also earn the same and gain multifold. So, in this venture, we will aim to provide the special needs community with a friendship experience via a phone call from a buddy.

We aim to make this a weekly call on a designated day and time for example, Tuesday at 6 pm for around 2 months at least to create a rapport and friendship. They could make a simple conversation around how they spend their day, hobbies, favourite food, etc.

Start a WhatsApp group with all the participants and the moderators. A brief introduction about the person paired with will be given. Ask for an introduction about themselves on the group with details like name, student/profession, hobbies, languages spoken, and anything else they'd want to add.

This will be an enriching, rewarding experience for all and fulfill the Reachout mission.



2. Guideline – II

In continuation of the guidelines shared at the beginning of the month. The second month will be even more eventful and fun as well as challenging for all, but everyone is now definitely set for it.

Over ongoing discussions, follow-ups, and guidance calls, it was clear that it's all about teamwork, mainly the rapport between parent/caregiver and volunteer buddy with the self-advocate too and us being facilitators.

The spirit and enthusiasm showed amazing results. Hence interactions between buddies and SA's (Self-Advocates) can increase subject to convenience. In the 2nd month, it can be more about the buddy pairs working on the Reachout Anthem. They can learn, sing and follow it. Then work towards a joint performance, in any area of their choice; singing, art, dance, cooking, drama, story, poetry, etc. Think out of the box, to come up with something unique.

Writeups from volunteer buddies and parents could be invited too on how the journey has been so far.

The most important thing is that even if this event ends by the 2nd month, it also starts a new journey for all to see how they can take it further. After all, friendships are for keeps, right?

We also recommend and encourage all to create their team or group and meet or connect at least once a month to continue the good work. Keeping in touch couldn't be easier than ever before, but will mean the world for all to cherish. Close-up pictures of the 'jodis' are needed for documentation.

Lastly, buddies must be encouraged not to hesitate to get in touch if they need help or guidance as all are together. Good luck...



3. Guideline – III

“The group is nearing the end of the Gift A Smile project in a few days. It was an overwhelming experience, for us to see the outcomes so far, where the bar was raised, from a call once a week to great bonding with chats, art, singing, games, puzzles, and more.

Great efforts by the volunteer buddies to step out of their comfort zones to adapt patiently to and connect with their partners at their wavelength.

This learning will go a long way for sure for all. How you take this forward is up to the participants. We had suggested 2 things to enhance the efforts, learning and reciting the Reachout Anthem and showcasing a joint activity by month-end. This was an idea suggested to facilitate the interactions, but not meant to cause any stress, so again it is entirely the participant's call.



A request to all participants to please share their full names and email IDs as will need to present participation/appreciation certificates for the commitment to this cause.

Also, welcome writeups from volunteers and parents if you wish to share, how this experience has been an impact on the special needs participants.

For those who are preparing for joint activity or item together, they can get back to the organizing team so they can figure out the rest. All the very best to all!”

Heartiest Smiles and Excited Responses From Self-Advocates, Families & Volunteers

- Compiled by Harsha Dawani

1. Rockstar Olympian multitalented Rishi with Creative aeronaut explorer Sajid

Rishi's Mother: Rishi spoke to his buddy Sajid today and his happiness knew no boundaries. Super excited, all smiles n a great mood was the outcome. What was amazing is that Sajid found time to talk to Rishi despite his busy schedule. Thank you, Sajid. Thank you reach out and all who worked towards spreading a smile.

Today Rishi had so much fun singing n listening to his buddy Sajid. I thought this was an Ajivasan class. Such a noble deed from the buddies who are giving their time, spreading joy & awareness with our children. Hats off. Thank you all.

Buddy Sajid came over to meet Rishi. Can you imagine the excitement! It was a beautiful meet... Like we have known each other for years. Beautiful idea... Beautiful result too...

Buddy, Sajid: Spoke to the most talented human today.

2. Music lover Dancer Sachit with artist-photographer explorer Hemang

Sachit's Mother: Sachit and Hemang got along very well. They had a long chat and He is very happy after talking to him...

Buddy Hemang: Just had my first interaction with Sachit. What a powerhouse of confidence and strength he also showed me his hand-painted diyas and introduced me to his dog. Looking forward to our next when he shows me his recent dance video

3. Loving assistant, chef, music lover Girish with Smart Tech-Savvy Collegian Om

Girish Dada's Sister: They have spoken when he called to wish Girish on his birthday, then spoke about whatever they like and Girish was tempted when he said Puri bhaji and he pretended to eat the cake and chikki offered across the screen and promised to get Puri bhaji when he visits. Girish was asking if Om can come for his birthday, so when I told him how can he like all others he is at home, so video calls helped to see each other. We called him as Girish was remembering him and asked when are your exams since he's got a lot of classes on; He is 17-year-old. And obviously, Girish asked who all are there in the house, what did u have for breakfast, etc. A tough question for most as they don't remember.

Buddy Om: Girish is a fabulous personality to talk with. His excitement was so clear in his voice. He conversed as he knew me for a long time. It was such a great call. Looking forward to our next call. I should admit he has a busier day than me. It was a pleasure talking with him. I will call him on the 10th to wish him on his birthday.

4. Bubbly joyful singer-dancer Kimaya, with creative Youtuber artist Melissa

Kimaya's Mother: Complete concentration and all smiles! Kimaya talking to buddy Melu! Melissa and Kimaya are chatting, exchanging pics and whatnot, Melissa even trimmed her name to Melu to match Kim. Kimaya and Melissa had a great time together, admiring each other's artworks. Next time they have promised each other to do an art and craft activity together on a video call. Thank u so much, Melissa!

Buddy Melissa: I was hesitant initially; our first call was just knowing each other basic. Later Kim and I shared images, videos and chatted on WhatsApp, daily. In this way we got to know each other more, and better. By the next calls, we were able to have great communication, and now we've even planned to meet once things open up. Kim's mom also joined our calls and made our conversations happen with ease. It's nice talking to Kim and knowing about her life and her enterprise.

5. Devout musician and dancing superstar Aditya with fun-loving Abhishek

Aditya's Mother: Aditya is enjoying his talk with his buddy Abhishek. He has already listed out the things to be spoken as he and his buddy are meeting again virtually tomorrow. Aditya and Abhishek have planned to meet in June mostly if things work out well.

Buddy Abhishek: Had a great talk with my buddy Aditya. He is a wonderful person and he has great knowledge about art. It was amazing to talk to him and every time I talk with him, he inspires me. Thank you, Aditya, for sharing your knowledge and talent with me.

6. Super Friendly, music lover gardener Sneha with Stylish creative Akanksha

Sneha's Mother: Sneha thoroughly enjoyed chatting with Akanksha. They hit off very well chatting about what breakfast they had to share their hobbies and what they had in common. Sneha can't wait for the next call to happen. She is already bubbling with questions she forgot to ask today, thank you all :)

Today, Sneha was remembering Akanksha and thinking of calling her when Akanksha called, she was very happy. Today, I didn't intervene. I let them chat on their own.



Shilpa

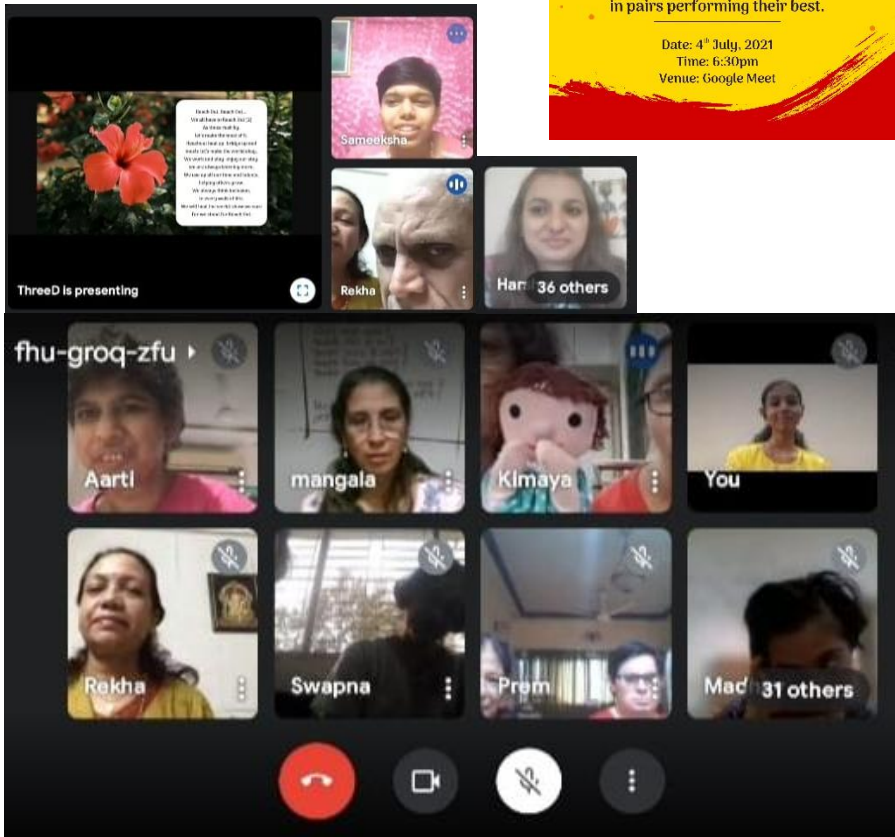


Gargi



Finale Presentation

Towards the end of the 2 months, we invited our Jodi's to plan a presentation by themselves which we could showcase. So, we had 11 Jodi's who committed to this and worked with the buddy and parents. They sent us videos of this work and some wanted to do it live at the Finale event on 4th July. This was the first-time virtual event for Reachout, so was Gift A Smile. We sent out invites to many people and had a good response to the event. It was an eye-opener for everyone to see the spread of creativity, bonding, and inspiring performances. Our friendship partners that we collaborated with were our guests of honor, namely Trinayani and The Dancerdowns.



The team that Gifted Smiles



Sheetal Kapoor
Creative Visualizer



Darren DSouza
Superman Creative



Yojana Wavikar
Eco-Friendly Energy



Deepa Bhat
Everbusby All-rounder



Mangala Rajwade
Tech-savy Multi-tasker



Harsha Dawani
Petite Reporter



Rekha Balgi
Chaser & Nudger



**The Most Important
Ganpati Bappa**

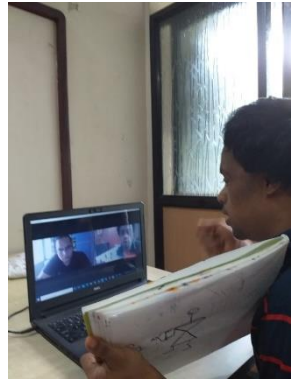
Outcomes

Everyone who attended our finale event of Gift A Smile were mesmerized by the creativity and innovative ideas used to display friendship and connect between the buddies. Our guests of honor and invitees loved every bit of it and shared encouraging remarks. We started sharing these popular performances one a day on our social media with relevant inputs. This was well appreciated too and very encouraging.

Salient Features

From the 2-month experience on this project, certain things were prominent.

- We had constant monitoring and support provided with follow-up calls to volunteers and parents.
- Ideas were given on how they can plan their communication and presentations.
- Participants were encouraged to share with the group about their calls, chats, video calls, activities, etc., which would motivate others too.
- Based on feedback received by participants and parents/guardians, feedback posters were created.
- The triad of volunteers, parents, and special needs person together being involved showed great results and learning for all.
- Our purpose was also to encourage communication, expression, and self-advocacy skills for the challenged. It was seen that given an opportunity, they could develop self-confidence and be assertive.



Testimonials

Aditya's mother, Mrs. Subramaniam: No journey is too long when you have good riding buddies. This is very apt for the A grader's Aditya and Abhishek, his buddy. They enjoyed being together and had lots of fun playing brain games, riddles, Antakshari, and exchanging their travel tales. Abhishek is a great buddy cum brother to Aditya. The very first sentence of his was, "Aditya, I am just a call away and at any time available for you..." That conveyed everything about Abhishek. He is very caring, extremely patient, a fun-loving person, and a foodie too. We hope to meet soon over brunch and a movie.

Aditya's Buddy, Abhishek Chaudhari: My name is Abhishek Chaudhari, and I am an Audiologist and Speech-Language Pathologist. Firstly, I would like to thank the Reach Out team for the wonderful, joy and happiness they have given to everyone by carrying out this marvelous initiative. Most importantly, I would like to thank all the parents for trusting all the buddies. I was very happy when I got Aditya as my buddy. For me, he is like a best friend whom I can talk to and have a good laugh with. Aditya is an enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and creative kid. He showed me his drawings and artwork. I was amazed, I asked him if he could tutor me. To be honest I can't draw or paint so well, having no eye for details. Thank you, Aditya's parents for trusting me and being there during our calls, it was a great help.

Shilpa's Buddy, Gargi: The Reach Out program was a very fun experience for me. It was my first experience and I learned a lot from it. It showed how to connect and befriend someone new and also gave me a chance to help and make someone smile. I even got a new friend for a lifetime. My family is very proud of me for taking part in this programme. Once when my mother saw me interacting with my buddy Shilpa, she was inspired and she too wishes to be a buddy someday, when she has time from her busy schedule.

Aditi's Buddy, Sheetal Pai: Gift A Smile by Reach Out has provided the 26 beneficiaries a platform to express themselves in these difficult times of limited to no social interaction. My buddy was Aditi Verma and it is a pleasure knowing her. Not only have I got a true friend for life but I have learned important life lessons from her. Her enthusiasm is incomparable and I wish I could imbibe at least half of it. I wish to meet her soon and treat myself to her mouthwatering recipes. I think Reach Out is doing a great job by bringing like-minded people together and spreading awareness and empathy through such projects. Your Words express the joy and how happy you people are to see the children progressing. I wish you all the best for bringing a smile to many more faces through this and similar projects in the future.

Jhumur's Buddy, Sameeksha Shenvi: One fine morning, I got a WhatsApp message from Mangala ma'am asking me to join a google meet urgently. I was confused why such a message and what kind of meeting it would be. When I clicked the link, the meeting had already begun. My friends were in too. Her request was to be a buddy in the REACH OUT - Gift A Smile project and spread smiles and be friends with special adults, Self-Advocates, who was bored being at home due to lockdown. It struck me then, that if I could get so bored, how bored they might be feeling being at home!

As the discussion got over, I discussed this with my parents and they immediately supported me to be a volunteer. I contacted Mangala ma'am and told her about my interest in the project and also got my doubts cleared. We were all added to a WhatsApp group, where we were asked to give an introduction about ourselves, our interests, and our hobbies. On that basis, we were paired with our Self Advocates. Before the project commenced, I was very nervous as to how I would be able to converse with them but then the enthusiasm and belief to spread smiles and to do something special helped me slowly to manage things and now I am a part of this sweet family. This 2-month project of Reach Out taught me various things such as, to be a patient listener, to get to know more about people, and to become friendlier.

It gave me a combination of a sister and a friend in Jhumur. My parents are proud of me as I became a part of this initiative. I would like to say a great Thank you to Mangala Ma'am, Rekha Ma'am, and Yojana Ma'am for making me a part of this wonderful initiative. THANK YOU...!!!



Kimaya's Buddy, Melissa DSouza: Kim and I were one of the first buddy pairs created for the 'Gift a Smile' initiative by Reach Out. I remember when I called Kim for the first time, I was both excited and nervous because I usually don't speak on phone but if I was making someone happy by doing it, I'm more than happy to do it. Looking back, I realized how nervous we both were speaking to someone who we didn't know, but as we started talking more frequently, we got more comfortable speaking and sharing our thoughts. Soon we had our first video call which brought us even closer to knowing and understanding each other better. We even did some activities together. And when we are not speaking, we are constantly texting each other and share our daily activities too. Kims Mommy also played a great role in our friendship. Once things get better, we'll soon meet. To conclude, I would say a big Thanks to Reachout and I'm glad I was a part of this project and I was able to 'Make a Difference' through this event.



Melissa's Brother, Darren DSouza: Gift A Smile, by Reachout was that initiative that connected two individuals from different corners. This wasn't just an online connecting of two individuals but something that made friendships, inclusiveness of the special individuals and as the event name says, it 'gifted smiles'. I'm glad that Melissa was a part of this, it's her first interaction with the special individuals. She was matched with her buddy Kim, and they conversed, learned, and did several activities online. They became friends real quick, and then Melissa was all on her own. Just as said, it was more than just an event; Melissa has learned a lot from this and through this event; she was able to 'Make A Difference' and 'Gift A Smile. Also, I'm happy that I am a part of the Core Group of this initiative.

Dhriti's Buddy, Sae: I'm grateful to everyone who allowed me to participate in such an inspiring and motivating event of Reachout. Throughout the 2 months, I enjoyed talking to Dhriti. We had a lot of things in common which made our gossips limitless! I was also really inspired by Dhriti, because she is indeed much more talented and productive than me. Some days we played ludo, and some days we watched movies. Not just for 2 months, but we will surely be friends even after this event. I am really glad that I was one of the members of Reach Out and got a complete new experience. I still remember the way Dhriti used to smile when I called her and I hope that we meet someday in person to enhance our friendship.

Dhriti's Mother, Mrs. Pandit: A Big Thanks to Reach Out for gifting a smile to Dhriti! The experience has awakened the sense of true belonging/friendship with her buddy Sae within a short time. She used to eagerly wait for the calls and the chat. For Dhriti, it began simply as a chat, but now in hindsight, she has got a good friend!

Collaboration

We have collaborated with NGO The Dancerdowns and guided them with starting the next phase of the 'Gift A Smile' project there with 20 pairs of participants. This is going well too and inviting a lot of interest.

Threads of Silver & Gold

The Weaver's hand is designing
Some threads every day,
I must not detain the Weaver,
Or get in the way.
I shan't hurry the plan,
Or question the design,
With threads of gold and silver;
The old pattern is left behind.
With the Weaver at steady work,
There is nothing to fear,
God has a definite plan for me,
Or I wouldn't be here.
- Mildred H. Bell

Inspiration to this Virtual Resource Guide

With a lot of interest and queries on our project and more set-ups wanting to initiate it, it was felt that a resource guide will help provide all necessary information and guidance to all. Hence this attempt to document it and share with all a road map.

You may view the complete guide by [clicking here](#)



Smile virus continues to spread :)

Finally, I must add that our smile virus is in the air and a welcome desirable one that too. We hope it can spread happiness and joy to many families. This too is a divine plan by higher design and we await more divine revelations.

Our journey can be summarized as:

*An idea took birth, an urge to create,
A seed is sown, that has bloomed and grown,
Branching out and reaching for the skies,
Soaring high and higher.
So, friends, Reachout is all about
making a difference and the journey continues.*

Buddy



Grateful,
Rekha Balgi



Certificate that was awarded to Participants



Made by
Pratibha
and Avani

Our Inspiration comes from...

- "Faith sustains Life,"
- "Bloom where you are Planted."
- "Everyone Belongs."
- "Together We Are Better."
- "Make A Difference."
- "Cooperation & Collaboration."
- "Love, Empathy, Respect & Acceptance for All."
- "Everyone is Unique & Special."
- "Life empowers us, allow it."
- "Impossible also means I am possible, anything is."

"Make a Call, Gift a Smile, Show you Care."

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

- Reinhold Niebuhr

Tell me, I will forget.
Show me, I may remember.
But involve me,
and I will understand better.

- A Special Child

The Reachout Anthem

Reach Out, Reach Out...

We all have to Reach Out [2]

As times rush by,

let's make the most of it,

Reachout heal up, bridge up and
touch; let's make the world okay.

We work and play, enjoy our stay,
we are always learning more,

We use up all our time and talents,
helping others grow,

We always think inclusion,
in every walk of life.

We'll heal the world; and show
we care for we stand for
Reach Out.



