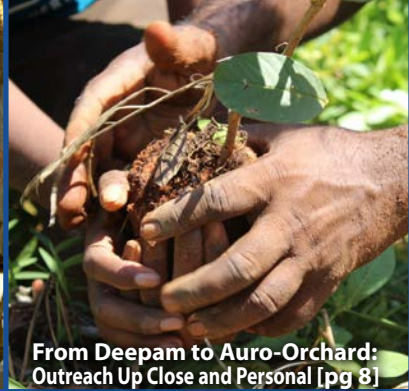




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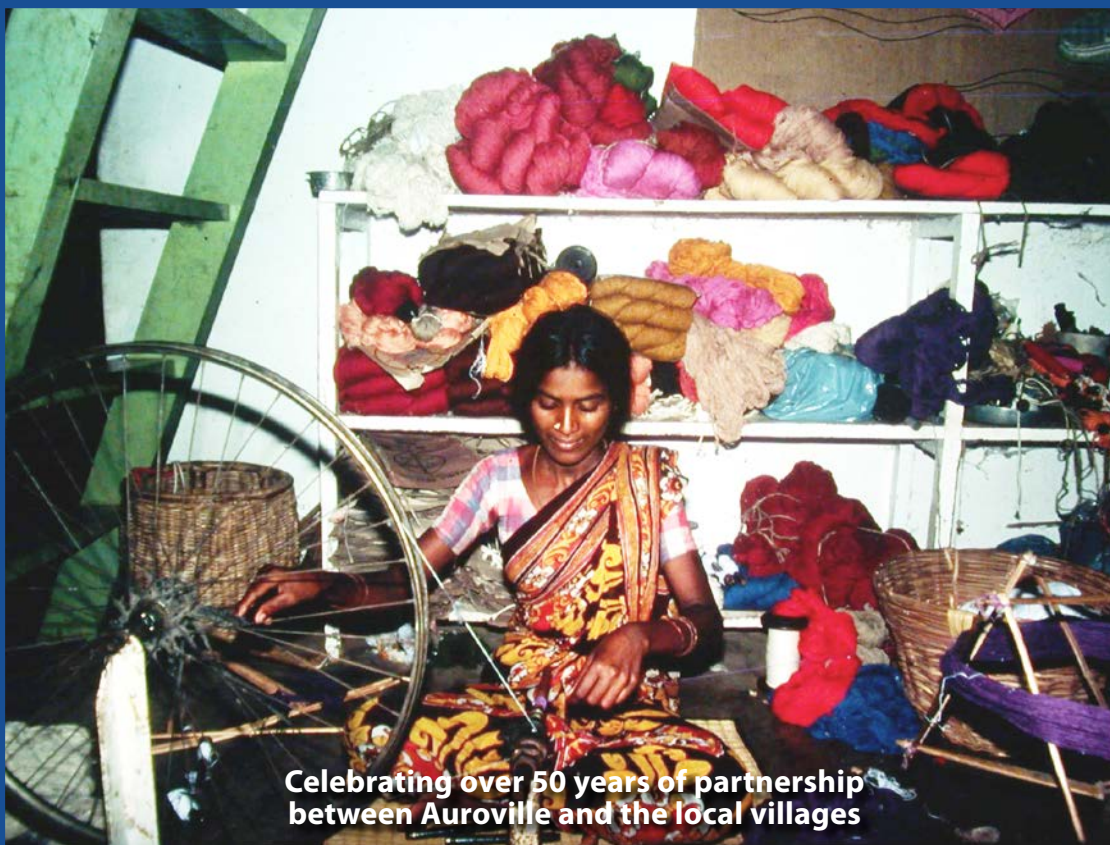
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AVI-USA CONNECT

FALL WINTER 2021/2022 Newsletter

Issue 17



Celebrating over 50 years of partnership between Auroville and the local villages

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Flower/section photos: Dorle Heller



Matthew Andrews

Dear Friend,

I hope that this issue of Connect finds you nourished in body and spirit. It can be a challenge to stay balanced and optimistic these days, as troubling news permeates news cycles. It's hard to stay hopeful amid all the voices trumpeting cynicism and despair.

Yet we know that the solutions to all our most pressing challenges will be found not in despair, but in hope, in openness to new possibilities, in curiosity and aspiration. And I'm not talking about the starry-eyed hope of unrealistic expectations. I'm talking about the essential hope that inspires us to have children, write poetry, plant trees, and create beauty for the future. This kind of fundamental hopefulness is Auroville's spiritual DNA. It's the bedrock upon which Auroville was founded and the reason that it has survived and thrived for so long.

It's audacious to believe that a city could be created that belongs to nobody in particular, but to humanity as a whole, where property is not individually owned and government is by collective harmony. It requires humility, openness and optimism to imagine a collective experiment like this, to commit to unending education and constant progress. It seems an impossible dream, one for which humanity is not ready, and may never be.

And yet thousands of people have given themselves to this attempt to create a bridge between the past and the future. Even though it has involved sacrifice and struggle, and even though Auroville's imperfections are plenty, they have come and contributed their blood, sweat and tears to this dream. The experiment is messy and unpredictable, as valuable experiments tend to be.

Auroville has never existed in isolation. It was born in the midst of a tangled socio-political landscape on the outskirts of Pondicherry, a former French colony that had just joined the young nation of India a few years prior. Decolonization is not an event that happens in a day or a week or a year. It's a process that evolves over decades as people who have been controlled by a foreign power seek political self-determination and the basic freedom to be themselves, to choose which language to speak and which traditions to honor.

Most early Aurovilians were westerners and north Indians seeking to build a spiritual city in Tamil Nadu, surrounded by Tamil people who had lived through centuries of colo-

nization by various western nations. Before the colonizers arrived, a rich culture thrived along the Coromandel Coast, which produced beautiful art and poetry, profound spiritual insights, and cutting edge technologies. This culture, suppressed but not at all wiped out by the imposition of colonialism, is part of the landscape out of which Auroville has grown. And its influence on Auroville has been substantial, inspiring alternative building systems, approaches to reforestation, as well as art and music.

At the time of Auroville's founding, the specific villages that encircled it were economically devastated and suffering from the effects of deforestation and soil erosion. The early Aurovilians saw this and responded with compassion and care. They quickly developed ways to uplift their Tamil neighbors, offering jobs, skills training, food and shelter, and education. These efforts were generally heartfelt, sincere, and complicated, as efforts by westerners to support and uplift indigenous people tend to be.

Over time, a diverse network of outreach organizations formed as bridges between the Tamil villages and Auroville. Today there are dozens of such organizations, and we will share some of their stories with you in this issue. To learn more about Auroville's many outreach projects, visit www.aviusa.org/outreach.

Auroville's strength is not that it has perfectly embodied its ideals. Its strength is that it keeps aspiring, keeps reaching toward the impossible. In a world that's growing more and more jaded and cynical about the future, Auroville continues to hope and to grapple with humanity's messiest problems, always seeking new solutions.

The spirit of Auroville embodies the new, the unexpected. It seeks the place where the deepest inner aspirations of our hearts connect with our words, actions, relationships, and vocations, the place where spirit and matter dance intertwined. And so Auroville has a lot to offer a world facing the overlapping crises of climate change, ideological polarization, and the consequences of colonization.

Auroville is a treasure trove of unique wisdom, skills and experience developed through explorations in reforestation, waste management, renewable energy, spiritual ecology, collective decision making, green

building, conscious conflict resolution, integral education, and the arts. And it also embodies a unique spirit of possibility: that of joining the aspirations toward material abundance and spiritual connection, physical well being and inner peace. Auroville whis-

pers to the world "It's not either-or. Wholeness is all-inclusive. All needs can be met. All dreams can be realized."

Throughout this past year, we have been asking the question: how do we help to share the unique gifts and spirit of Auroville with the world? How can all that has been cultivated here be harvested and distributed for the benefit of humankind?

We've channeled these questions into several experiments of our own. One is a research project called Exploring Auroville's Capacity to Flourish, which you can read about in this issue. Another is the development of Auroville Live, through which we have shared live broadcasts and events from Auroville with our friends around the world. You can learn more about Auroville Live and how to tune in to upcoming broadcasts at www.aviusa.org/auroville-live.

And we've developed a monthly email newsletter called eConnect that shares good news from Auroville in the form of updates, photos, and links to videos and articles. There is so much going on all the time that each issue is full and rich. You can subscribe to eConnect at www.aviusa.org/subscribe.

The experiment of Auroville is a microcosm of the great human experiment that each of us is living. We at AVI-USA aspire to be a bridge between Auroville and the broader world, sharing resources and realizations that can uplift humankind and open doors to new possibilities during this time of collective awakening. We invite you to join our work and intention. To find out about volunteer opportunities, please email us at info@aviusa.org, or call (831) 425-5620.

I hope you enjoy this issue of Connect, and that it inspires you to connect with your own sense of hope and optimism about our collective future.

In Friendship,
Matthew Andrews
Board President
AVI-USA



Fraternity: The Evolution of a Handicraft Unit in Early Auroville

By Binah Thillairajah

Bryan Walton has been a dedicated member of the Auroville International USA board for close to 20 years, and served twice as board President. His service was inspired by a long history with Auroville, dating back to Auroville's nascence in the early 1970s. Like many of the early Aurovilians, Bryan's experiences in the 1960s brought him to the Pondicherry ashram where he met the Mother.

In the 1960s Bryan was an activist and a seeker of deeper spiritual truths and social justice. He began his professional life as a casework social worker aspiring to make a dent in the poverty he saw in Cincinnati, Ohio. He met Sally, just returned from the Peace Corps, and they married. He soon became disillusioned by a welfare system that he saw as systematizing the urban poor rather than uplifting them.

Immersing themselves in the new awareness of the 1960s, they attended anti-Vietnam rallies and documented them in photographs, which they used to create slideshows on war, poverty and racism. They developed presentations that were shared in many collegiate settings and Catholic congregations. They even had a hip name for themselves: "media-environmental confluxionists".

Through the Catholic gatherings, Bryan and Sally met a priest who was writing a book on Tagore, Gandhi and Aurobindo. His favorite place of research was in the Pondicherry Ashram library, so he was familiar with Aurovilians. He told them that Auroville had just begun, and suggested it as a place where they might thrive. In 1971, they travelled to Pondicherry and then to Auroville.

When they arrived, they learned that due to a previous famine, many local weavers in the Auroville area were forced to sell their simple pit-looms. With the loss of their looms they had also lost their primary source of in-

come. Their response to this was to found a new living community for handicraft training and employment for local villagers. They asked the Mother for her blessing, and she named the community "Fraternity".

Inspired by their work on poverty in the US, they now set about creating programs that made a positive difference in the lives of local villagers and the early Aurovilians. They began by building a temporary structure for European-type frame looms, and many skilled weavers came. This became one of the first businesses in Auroville, producing Fraternity's handloom bed covers.

These income-generating activities attracted people to Fraternity - villagers and foreigners alike. Soon there was a team of people committed to providing vocational training and work for people in the nearby villages by producing export-quality handicrafts. With some income from sales, and a dynamic team of local villagers and new Aurovilians, Fraternity soon expanded into other handicrafts including tailoring, embroidered and crochet

products, lampshades, and grass mat making. This provided more diverse skills and income for eager villagers.

As demand grew, Bryan travelled to Europe and acquired orders for these locally manufactured handicrafts from organizations like Oxfam in England and other well-funded organizations in Holland and Germany. Auroville began to purchase Fraternity's products and give them free to new Aurovilians who were striving to make a new life there. Almost every home had some of Fraternity's bed covers,



1975 to 1977 - Globals department - with Tamil letters as ornament - Bryan checking quality of a global.

clothes and lampshades. These round lampshades, using both paper and handloom cloth, were called "global".

Another craft addition was making rope hammocks, and the innovation of the hammock chair. Bryan crafted these by modifying the hammocks to hang from a single point. The entire net income of Fraternity was reinvested in Auroville through the Central Fund and also into the local villages. Fraternity's income, plus a grant from Germany's Food and Agriculture Agency, funded new permanent buildings and a holistic kindergarten offering literacy, food, and health care for village kids. They also supported the drilling of a deep well and pipes for clean water for both Fraternity and the nearby Kulilpalayam village.

The handicraft business in Fraternity thrived until the early 1980s when shifting socio-economic policies in Auroville led to a period that was hostile to commercial businesses. Nevertheless, the collaborative approaches developed in Fraternity are the bedrock of many rural development and commercial projects in Auroville today.

Most of the products created in Fraternity, like the globals and the hammock chair, became staples of the local economy, with many local shops producing and selling them. Almost every home in Auroville has had at least one hammock chair and several global lampshades. And many of the people who worked at Fraternity, both foreign and Tamilian, have gone on to create their own small businesses and village outreach programs. Bryan's original inspiration as a young adult to become a social worker manifested



1972 - Krishnaveni (in back) showing crochet work to Indrani and Angeli



1981 March - handloom weaver Avadappam



FRATERNITY CONTINUED

itself and touched many lives on the other side of the world from Cincinnati, Ohio - in Auroville.

While Bryan was in Fraternity he also met his current wife, Fanou, who is featured in the photo contest in this issue of Connect. They grew their family to include three children. They left Auroville in the early 1980s to

raise their young family in the USA, and have continued to travel to Auroville almost every year. We are grateful that after his children became adults, Bryan was able to bring his skills, passion and tremendous devotion to the AVI-USA board. He continues to be a gentle light of inspiration to us all.



Bryan and Fanou on a recent visit to Auroville with a dear friend Stella an Isaiambalam teacher

Auroville's Outreach Programs - Past and Present

by Margaret Greer

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the foreigners who came to Auroville were responding to the zeitgeist of the moment - when most countries had open borders that allowed for curious international travelers to explore and travel across land through whole regions of the world. These travelers were often seeking a new perspective on life, and many of them resonated with the beauty and simplicity of Mother's ashram, her spiritual inspiration and the international feel of Pondicherry.

The dream of an international city was a natural outcome of the cosmopolitan spiritual milieu in Pondicherry at the time. The first foreigners to move to Auroville were inspired by the dream. They were also struck by the poverty in local villages and the poor condition of the land, both of which were legacies of hundreds of years of colonial rule. European colonialism denuded indigenous forests and stripped local economies by prioritizing foreign prosperity over that of local peoples.

In response to stark poverty in the villages and the parched state of the land, the first few hundred foreigners who came to Auroville intuitively tried to help regenerate the land and the people. Their approach was similar to what is now called spiritual ecology - an understanding that everything is alive and all life matters. They partnered with local Tamil villagers, relying on them to articulate the real needs of the people. Some of these original Tamil people are still involved in village outreach programs 50 years later.

Auroville is a microcosm in which all the world's problems have space to play in a concentrated multicultural playground, and where experiments seeking solutions to these problems can be carried out. Some of the most pressing problems that humanity faces

today involve elitism, othering, and exploitation by those with greater access to resources. Auroville's village outreach programs confront these issues directly, seeking always to manifest care, collaboration, and harmony between Aurovilians and their neighbors.

The early Aurovilians wanted to help their neighbors. So they started schools, health clinics, and vocational training programs, of which Bryan Walton's endeavor in Fraternity is an example. An accompanying article features early work in this area that he initiated in response to the needs of local weavers who had sold their looms in an earlier famine. Without looms, they had no source of income. Bryan and others provided looms and developed connections to international markets that created work and income.

Others are the early health clinics near Kulapalayam and in Kottakarai, Udayam Hostel, and Udavi School. These were intuitive efforts to regenerate the land and the people. It wasn't called "outreach" then. It was considered a natural part of building Auroville.

As Auroville has grown and prospered, the standard of living and scope of opportunities for the people in the neighboring villages have grown as well. And as the nature of the challenges in the villages have shifted, from access to food, clean water, and other basic necessities to alcoholism, waste management, and loss of cultural practices and traditions, the village outreach programs have expanded and shifted their focus. There is more emphasis on empowerment and cultural preservation, and a wide variety of educational programs that include leadership



School girl at Mohanam

development and sharing the Auroville's multicultural values, artistic expression, and free thinking.

There is no longer widespread extreme poverty in the villages around Auroville. But the need for bridges of friendship and collaboration that connect hearts and aspirations is as

important as ever. Many of Auroville's biggest challenges, like depleted aquifers, urban encroachment from Pondicherry, air pollution from garbage incinerators, and drift from pesticide spraying, all require strong relationships and trust. If Auroville is seen as a self-interested gated community, these critical issues will remain insoluble. The future depends on the realization of the Mother's words from 52 years ago:

"A relationship that is not only cordial but friendly with the inhabitants of the neighbouring village is absolutely indispensable. For the realization of Auroville the first step is to establish a true human fraternity - any shortcoming in this regard is a grave mistake which can compromise the whole work."

This issue of Connect explores the various outreach projects that have been born in Auroville over the past 50 years. This article will introduce four outreach programs and provide a brief look at the Outreach Board.

Let's start with the Life Education Center (LEC) near Isai Ambalam School, just outside Kottakarai. There is a unique learning model in place at LEC. When it began in 1991, the purpose was to address the lack of school opportunities for young children, particularly those subject to caste oppression. Activities



such as games, dancing, gardening, pottery, carpentry provided needed social interaction, and professional training was offered in areas such as typewriting, mechanics and tailoring. Of course, there were early struggles, including the language barrier between Tamil and English and the need to secure a steady stream of funding.



Learning to make kolams at LEC



Devi Namashivayam

Over many years the center evolved through several iterations in response to practical challenges. It began by serving young boys and girls, but over time the project leaders noticed a major gap in access to vocational training

and empowerment projects for girls and young women, so they shifted to serving just women and girls.

As Devi, a co-executive of LEC told us, the girls found an outlet from the repressions they felt at home as young females in a male dominated culture. Here they could express themselves and learn new things with the curriculum and activities tailored to what they wanted to learn and do. Eventually, more and more young girls had access to government-funded education, and it was the mothers who wanted to come to share and learn new skills. That's who primarily uses the center today, and who its programs are geared toward.

Now, LEC has evolved into much more than just a life skills project. As a social organization, it provides meditation, art, physical activities, collective discussions, even journal writing. And it's also a commercial social enterprise. Devi, who began as a volunteer for several years before becoming a current co-executive, realized the need for financial security and took the women's strong interest in fashion, sewing, and embroidery, and organized it into a small income-generating enterprise they've called Sakhi, meaning "friend" in many Indian languages.

They began selling their handmade products, including wall hangings, dresses, pillows, purses, and many other items in the

Auroville Visitors' Center at the end of 2018. Profits were returned to the students. It took a while to build up a stock of items to sell, but by 2019, the pace of production increased with the demand and it was a profitable year. Unfortunately, during 2020 everything shut down because of the pandemic and there were no customers or sales. They are all now looking forward to reopening and once again being able to gather to share and work.

As so often happens in Auroville, the people who are needed just happen to show up. This is what happened with Devi. Originally from Trichy, a few hours away from Auroville, she studied and then worked in the US for a number of years. However, as also so often happens, she intuited that something was missing in her life. After living in both the US and Auroville for a number of years, six months in each place, she returned to India and settled in Auroville. Devi volunteered in several locations and eventually found her home at LEC. She says of her position with LEC that, "To be that instrument of grace, to share that grace and growth with others helps me and motivates me. The grace has a direct effect on the people I work with and the center. I couldn't be happier doing any other work."

Near LEC is the outreach school Isai Ambalam, near the village of Irumbai. Isai Ambalam began as a school for music. Isai means music in Tamil, and Isai Ambalam is the "Home of Music". The school was actually started around 2000 to encourage village youth, mostly teenagers who had dropped out, to come learn different things, including English. As the government educational system has

changed, and as the bioregional economy has strengthened, so too has the school changed over the last two decades.

No longer focusing on programs for those who have left formal school, Isai Ambalam now serves village children in all grades up to 8th. The curriculum is project-based with focus on problem-solving and hands-on learning. The program integrates all the subjects and encourages the children to make choices and plan their own projects. They may choose to work alone or with others, choose their approach or even which project to do. And it is clearly successful because the children who graduate are well prepared to pursue further education at government exam-based schools.

The current executive, Sanjeev Ranganathan, found his place there quite by chance. After going to graduate school in New York, he worked in the US for a number of years. At some point he got involved in volunteer work connected to India, and through that work eventually found his way to Auroville. It didn't take long to decide to stay.

As an Aurovillian, he started by volunteering at several different schools and then became more and more involved at Isai Ambalam. After recognizing gaps in science and math education, he initiated a program called STEMLand that is now offered in many of the outreach schools in Auroville.

The STEMLand program deals primarily with technology, science, English, and math. Sanjeev says of the program, "We want to see responsibility, equality, and the courage to create in children. How it will happen in each place depends on the environment in that place. In Udavi, with the older children the approach aligns more with their free progress model, where the children are making choices. For the younger children, it's more about creating something they care about, working more hands-on. As to its success? In a presenten-



Sanjeev Ranganathan



Geography class at LEC



CONNECTIONS

AUROVILLE'S OUTREACH PROGRAMS CONTINUED

tation to the new secretary, Dr. Ravi, one girl who had just graduated from Isai Ambalam, ready to go into 9th grade, said of her experience, "In this school I learned how to concentrate, how to really focus and to do something well."

An offshoot of the STEMLand program is "Being and Becoming a Shifu", a program that Sanjeev developed at the beginning of 2021. Shifu means "to become a master of self, to master a skill, to master competencies of how we can create new patterns in society." The program works with young adults who already have a degree, often in technology, but are either unemployed or under-employed.

Sanjeev supports them in developing technology programs to use in area schools. They meet with him two days a week and work in the schools actually teaching those programs the other three days. Its goal? "We wanted to create our own program for young adults to learn differently so that they'll also teach differently. Each student has an individual mentor from the team of about 14 people. It has taken some time but these young adults have begun to teach in a very holistic style, learning as they do." Sanjeev is particularly happy with this program as it helps create the kind of teachers wanted in Auroville and it helps these youngsters master themselves. As he says, "I figured out that the purpose of my life is for me to grow and to create an environment for others to grow."

Udavi, a school that uses students in the Shifu program, is one of the oldest outreach education programs in Auroville. The school was originally begun as a creche in 1972 by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for the children of the workers at their Auroshikha incense factory. Over time, the school evolved and in 1988 was the first institution in the area to work under approval of the Education Board of Tamil Nadu.

The school currently draws students from three main villages; Kottakarai, Edayanchavadi, and Irumbai. If space allows, it can accept students from another three

villages in the area. There are about 300 students from three to 14 years old with 28 teachers and many volunteers. The student to teacher ratio is intentionally kept at 12:1 to ensure the development of the whole child, not just a child who can pass exams. Originally, the school accepted only one child per family but now they accept siblings as well, even an occasional foreign child visiting Auroville. According to Principal Davaselvy Palani, this policy helps to raise up the whole area. It brings village children into contact with each other, essentially bridging differences that might exist



Exploring Soil at Life Education

among villages. It also connects parents who wouldn't otherwise have a reason to meet.

The curriculum is provided by the Tamil Nadu government. However, the method for reaching the required targets is very different from a traditional school. Instead of didactic teaching and memorization, students at Udavi are developed through the use of art, vocational activities, clay, tailoring, composition, classical dance and singing, physical education, theater (improve language), hygiene and so on. They also focus on making good personal decisions. Davaselvy does this by getting them to think through an issue rather than telling them what they must do. She creates space for mistakes so the stu-



Davaselvy

dents can learn for themselves what could be a better way.

The Auroville schools that serve children in the local villages are all part of a collective called the Outreach Board. The board is composed of one or two individuals from each outreach organization and meets monthly. It is there to serve and provide support to the outreach organizations.

In the past the Outreach Board determined budgets for each of the outreach programs. This has shifted recently as members have decided to focus more on collaboration and learning from each other and less on competing for limited resources. They have intentionally shifted their focus from a scarcity mindset to an openness to abundance, using the resources they share to improve their work and meet shared goals.

Now the board explores questions like, "What is the impact we want to have? What are the outcomes we want to achieve? How are we going to go about to achieve those outputs? What are the inputs we need to meet these outputs and outcomes and impact?" One result from this ongoing discussion is an examination of the positive outcomes and ongoing challenges that the programs face.

Some of the positive outcomes that they have identified include a generation of youth exposed to a broader education than the mainstream system. These youth have gained an integral approach of self and society, especially through the lens of the



Udavi school assembly

HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT AUROVILLE OUTREACH

Do you want to support the outreach programs?

You can sign up at www.aviusa.org/outreach to be a monthly donor and educate a child for \$20/month. Or you can make a one-time donation of \$240 to support a child for one year. Of course a donation in any amount will have a direct impact on the education and well being of youth living in the Auroville bioregion. And if online giving isn't for you, feel free to mail us a check and let us know it's for the Outreach Programs!

aviusa.org/outreach



Udavi students and ostrich



environment, art, personal exploration and inquiry. Many of them now have master's level qualifications and are working both locally and internationally. Local adolescent girls and young women are more confident and can face life with strength and are more empow-

ered not only financially but in all aspects of life. And in general the local people find it much easier to find employment which has eased the pressure of struggle for survival.

At the same time, population density and cost of living in the villages has increased dramatically, and the quality of education in the local government school remains poor. Unemployment continues to be an issue, even

for young people with skills, and alcoholism, debt, the erosion of traditional kinship networks, domestic violence, and depression are real issues for many families. And today parents value education much more than they did 50 years ago, and young people want to go to college and earn degrees. So the need and demand for the outreach programs continues.

A GLIMPSE OF THE BREADTH OF AUROVILLE OUTREACH PROGRAMS

Over the past 50 years Aurovilians have developed a variety of outreach programs that are geared towards uplifting and strengthening local villagers. The categories of village outreach programs below is an attempt to convey the breadth of collaborative work that is currently ongoing in the villages around Auroville. The list is not comprehensive, as work in Auroville is organic and always evolving.

The various initiatives have been placed in categories where their work is primarily focused but many categories overlap. In addition, there are some Auroville projects that include outreach work in addition to their primary mission, for example, Auroville Botanical Gardens, Pitchandikulam Forest and Solitude Farm. These programs also attempt to increase awareness to solutions that address the climate challenges of the region such as Wasteless that works with schools to provide the younger generations with the tools to introduce programs for recycling and litter management.

There are also programs that are integrating local wisdom to address modern challenges, like the Earth Institute's use of mud bricks for building, or the Botanical Garden's seed bank that documents local healers' knowledge of medicinal herbs. And there are many programs that cut across our categories to focus on empowerment and emerging local needs such as Auroville Village Action.

What follows are outreach categories with examples. **For more in-depth information on these programs please go to aviusa.org/outreach**

Formal Education

Many attempts at empowerment of people start with education, with the hope that formal education will allow people to have a better grasp of the world around them and increase their access to resources and employment. In this spirit the outreach schools attempt to provide the highest level of education, serving both body and soul for their students.

- Aikiyam School 260 students
- Isai Ambalam School 155 students
- New Era Secondary School 160 students
- Kuilapalayam Trust School 2,500 students
- Udavi School 370 student

Informal/Supplemental Education

These programs are for local youth and adults and address issues such as empowerment, local environmental activism and care of youth.

- Thamarai Learning Projects
- Deepam (school for kids with different abilities)
- Auroville Botanical Garden
- Auroville Bio-regional Sports Association
- Payanam Cycle Trip
- Arulvazhi
- New Colors
- Malarchi Boarding Program
- Sadhana Forest
- Wasteless



Local students at an Eco-Femme workshop

Vocational Programs

These programs provide skills that equip local youth and adults with tools that are highly sought after in the current job market, as well as providing support for youth who want to pursue degrees in higher education.

- Auroville Institute of Applied Technology
- Sustainable Livelihood Institute
- Reach for the Stars
- StemLand

Cultural Heritage

These programs celebrate Tamil Culture and empower youth and adults to preserve and honor the beauty and history of their own culture that goes back thousands of years.

- Mohanam Cultural Heritage Centre
- Kuilai Creative Centre
- Ilaignarkal Education Centre

Health Care

These programs have a fixed facility and outreach health workers who travel to nearby villages to address basic healthcare needs and referrals to hospitals where necessary.

- Auroville Dental Centre Educational
- Research Rural Action
- Auroville Health Center

Women's Empowerment

When there is a shortage of resources, women are impacted most as the primary caregivers and providers for children. And research has shown that programs that impact women positively have an exponential positive effect that ripples out into society.

- Kuilai Clean Service
- Life Education Centre
- Auroshakthi Awakening House
- Auroville Village Action
- Eco Femme
- Well Paper



From Deepam to Auro-Orchard: Outreach Up Close and Personal

by Leo Keller

What a year! Despite it being a year dominated by COVID-9 across the world, we have managed to live a fulfilling and varied life in many ways. The same can't be said for many Tamilians and Indians who have been devastated by the virus on so many levels.

Amongst the students of Deepam, the therapy centre where I work, these stories are familiar. Three of our children had such dangerously low haemoglobin levels (lack of nutritious food with Deepam closed and the families not being able to provide properly for them at home) that they had to get blood transfusions. Usually Deepam does not give out cash to the families of the children for various reasons, but during these Covid times that has become a necessity, along with food and essential household items.

Despite all the gloom I've briefly summarised just now, we have had some really special initiatives grow out of it too. In the blog called 'Occupational Therapy in Auroville', I spoke about my hopes for Auroville

to be a place where my practice is not dictated by fear-based barriers, but rather for it to be free for me to work to my fullest potential. My hopes have come true, and it has been an absolute joy working in an environment where I can adapt and develop my work to be the most useful for the kids and students we serve.

During the first lockdown, Deepam closed and I started working at Auro Orchard farm for a few hours each morning before doing online work for Deepam and other Auroville outreach projects. Although I started working on the farm for some physical exercise and because it seemed like a 'good thing to do', I started quite enjoying working with the soil and wanted to share this opportunity with our

Deepam students. Schools were closed, but farm work was allowed. On 3rd August 2020 the first two Deepam students came to join me on the farm. This marked the beginning of a beautiful and enriching collaboration between Deepam and Auro Orchard which has been rewarding for everyone it has touched.

One of those two students comes from a family where his father was aggressive towards his wife before he committed suicide a few years ago. This nonverbal autistic 18 year old, now the man of the house, with his father as a role model, became physically commanding towards his smaller mother and sister. There were many issues at home and they were struggling to cope with him. Coming to the farm every morning and working hard alongside other volunteers, contributing to something beyond himself, and then bringing fruit and vegetables home for his family, gave him an opportunity to be the man of the house in a much more constructive way. His journey over the last year where he has blossomed from an unconfident, uncoordinated child, to a capable, confident young man who takes initiative and pride in his work is evident. Incidents at home have dropped dramatically and the family reports he is eating and sleeping better. He has the most infectious smile and has become a much loved member of the farm team.

As I write this, we have fifteen students coming to the farm in two groups across four days, as well as ten Deepam team members. It is moving to see the students, who are often disregarded

within their families and communities, contribute so richly to the farm and society.

The response from the farm has also been overwhelmingly positive. One of the farm employees, who has worked on the farm for 40 years since he was a child helping his parents, told me that he has been deeply touched by how much the Deepam team has given the farm. He said that when they first started he was unsure about it, but the students have brought so much positive energy and practical help that his perceptions of what people with disabilities can contribute has completely changed.

The Deepam team have also seen how positive the farm work is for the students: how the motor skills they have learnt on the farm are translating into everyday tasks at Deepam; how those who are nonverbal open up and express themselves more richly when surrounded by nature; how they come to Deepam after a morning on the farm shining with energy, but also calmly grounded. And the students themselves have expressed as best they can that they are very happy coming to the farm. One of our students, who has always said that she wants to work as a cook one day, has now said that perhaps she would like to be a farmer instead.

Organising the farm work will become more logistically challenging once Deepam is able to fully reopen again; however we hope to continue the farm work in some way for our students into the future. Alongside the farm work, we have also been exploring how to develop the vocational training we offer and support the adult students who are able to go into work. It is an exciting time for us, with many opportunities unfolding.

To learn more or to donate go to:
avisa.org/outreach.



Deepam student mulching.



Deepam student and team member plant a guava tree.



Deepam student pruning.



Deepam student harvesting





Outdoor AV Film Festival

7th Auroville Film Festival

January 18-23, 2022

by Daniel Rabin

For the first time ever, the Auroville Film Festival will be broadcast live around the world. To find out how to join, visit aviusa.org/auroville-live.

Imagine walking into the Town Hall campus just as dusk turns to night. The January air is cool and you are greeted by a small, brightly lit stage, where local musicians perform. A crowd of all ages has gathered to enjoy the live music. There are colourful lights, kids are running around and people are seated under traditional Shamiana awnings at long wooden tables and benches. Food aromas float in the breeze as a team of volunteers serves something different every day. People are dancing, eating and meeting up with friends. Some are chatting about the films screened earlier that afternoon at the two nearby indoor theatres: The one at SAIER - Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research; And the other in the state-of-the-art Multimedia Centre, a.k.a. Cinema Paradiso.

And then it's 20:00, the music stops and things quiet down. An outdoor projection screen has been set up on the lawn in front of the Town Hall building. Just behind the screen is a stunning view of the Matrimandir towering over the treetops. As the film starts audience members have the choice of 200 garden chairs arranged on the lawn or enjoying the birds-eye view from one of the Town Hall's upstairs terraces. Others head for a different indoor screening at Cinema Paradiso where films continue playing late into the night.

This is the Auroville Film Festival experience. And while this year you may be away from Auroville during the January 18-23 event, you will still be able to enjoy it from your living room wherever you are. We are happy to announce that thanks to a generous donation from AVI-USA, we have

partnered with Shift72 to make the 7th AVFF an online event. Shift72 is the streaming platform of choice for many major film festivals around the world, such as Cannes, Sundance, TIFF and Dharamshala. They are providing us with their Starter Lite package at a discounted rate in support of Auroville's ideals, and we're very grateful to AVI-USA for making it possible.

Conditions permitting, in-person screenings will again take place at Town Hall as usual. And while the fairground atmosphere remains light and festive, the topics featured are important and often heart wrenching. The AVFF is about exploring and understanding Auroville's aspirations for human unity more deeply, and that means engaging with the true stories of humanity, even when they are difficult to watch and unjust. That is why this year we intend to highlight films about Africa, a rapidly changing continent whose tremendous challenges echo those of India. We also focus on other topics relevant to current events, from the position of women, to the state of farmers and agriculture, to the global youth's efforts to defend the environment and climate.

The ultimate catalogue still awaits a final selection round, as well as the filmmakers' confirmed permission that we screen their work via our online platform. That said, I would like to highlight a few remarkable films which have stood out during the preliminary selection, and which we'll hopefully be able to share. Among films from India, *Kanya* (2020) explores the challenges of growing up a girl in Tamil Nadu between tradition and modernity, religious ritual and competitive sports. Meanwhile, with Delhi as an example, *People of Waste* (2020) takes a look at the surreal, informal economy surrounding the developing world's landfills. It gives a voice to some of the many thousands of people living in the shadow of consumer society, from garbage pickers and sorters, to the machine operators who transform processed plastic into new products for sale. Unheard and unrepresented, these people quietly eke out a living from India's mountains of urban waste.

Taking her own tragic family story as a case study, *The Art of Living in Danger* (Iran, 2020) follows one filmmaker's struggle to ex-

pose the violence against women plaguing her country. Under a religious regime, the film follows a brave group of women pushing for new legislation to protect a full half of the population, whom the revolution forgot. Finally, *School of Hope* (Finland-Morocco, 2020) documents a teacher's struggle against the odds to provide education to the children of a remote nomadic tribe whose way of life is threatened by climate change. Overcoming resistance from their traditional parents, these kids trek daily through North Africa's harsh and dramatic landscapes for the joy and opportunities of learning. These international stories, from India to Africa and on to western nations, paint a picture of humanity in its diversity, fighting for a future, dignity and to protect life on this fragile, beautiful Earth.

To share the experience of living in the city for human unity, the Auroville Film Festival will also include films about Auroville and its bioregion, and those made by local filmmakers and students. And while we may not be able to make all international films available online, all those created by Aurovilians will be accessible on the platform, with some very unique ones coming up. A special feature we plan for our AVI-USA supporters will be live interviews with Aurovillian filmmakers, giving the chance to hear about their creative process.

I'd like to say a word about our ethic, which has been and remains non-commercial. The dream of Auroville is that beauty, art, and of course truth, should be universally accessible to everyone. This is difficult to do, especially as we've been informed by SAIER that this is the last year they will support us. We're thus starting a crowdfunding campaign, and will share more information and links soon. Any remaining donations beyond the current festival's costs will go towards the following edition. In the true spirit of Auroville - just as with previous Auroville Film Festivals held locally - the online event this year will be offered completely free of charge.

A child of the Soviet Union, Daniel Rabin's adult life was spent under Canadian maple trees exploring different spiritual paths and studying psychology. He finally made the decision to move to Auroville 2 years ago. Inspired by the surprising connections between English, Russian, Sanskrit and other languages, Daniel feels that words are key to human unity and is currently studying Tamil.





Photo Contest

Auroville has a way of capturing people's hearts and imaginations. Its dusty roads, nightly melody of forest creatures, winding cycle paths, wandering animals, vibrant farms, and delicious foods create a mesmerizing atmosphere that invites you to explore both yourself and the township. Whether one visits for a day or for a lifetime, the experience is one that is deeply personal, far more personal than the polished images we typically see of Auroville. It was this exploration into that which often goes unseen that our first ever photo contest was born.

We asked our fellow friends of Auroville to submit their favorite pictures from their time in the township and tell the story behind the pictures. The contest, aptly named **Auroville Through Your Eyes**, resulted in a beautiful and nostalgic walk down familiar dusty roads and cycle paths. Each and every photo submission was equal parts thoughtful and thought-provoking. It became evident from the very beginning of the contest how much love and effort went into each entry and we were filled with gratitude as we relived each memory together, reminding us of our own forgotten memories.

In the spirit of sharing, three winners were selected and each was given the opportunity to choose an Auroville Unit (or several) of their choice to receive a donation in their name. First and second place were chosen based on engagement with their pictures while third place was a Judge's Choice award, selected by members of our Board. The winners and their choice of Unit are featured here.

Runner-Up



Auroville Tango Festival

First Place: Maya Apfelbaum

"Three friends of different ages, stages, shades each peacefully engaged: exploring, playing or meditating in the communal mud bath at Sadhana Forest, a live-in eco-service project on the edges of Auroville.

These three are enjoying this special spot together and yet also apart, each engrossed in their own contemplations. The restorative happiness we volunteers could access at this human-plus-nature-made seasonal mud pool swimming hole was that of sheer delight. We went slipping and dipping, splashing, swimming and laughing, diving and arising out of the liquid mud in the stunningly cool water, alone or with others, with such a sense of freedom and comradery—and also deep quiet at times. We covered ourselves head, hair and toe in the mud and were transformed, suddenly all having the same muddy brick brown-gray-green sheen to our faces. Mud brothers and sisters we were.

I went there as often as I could—up the well-trodden winding earthen trail flanked by lovingly planted and sustained indigenous Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest trees to arrive at the packed dirt levy which announced the magical water hole hiding just beyond. A dream made real each day. And for me, in the center of that was the mud pool, the watering hole helping refresh us on this path!"

Maya chose to split her \$250 prize among three Units: Terra Soul, Eco Services, and Isai Ambalam Guesthouse.

Second Place: Fanou Walton

"My partner and I went overland to India and the Ashram in 1969. When there, I visited Auroville, Aspiration mainly which was still very new. When I was there, a sudden thought came to me that surprised me, because I was not particularly impressed by the people there, but anyway



Fanou Walton -2nd Place.



Maya Apfelbaum-1st place.

the thought came very clear that if I have a child, he should be born here in Auroville. So a year and half later, I found myself pregnant, I said to my partner, I am going to Auroville now to have the baby there. It is what I did. I arrived in October

in the Ashram. One day in the Samadhi, Mali invited me to visit Utility for a lunch. I loved the beauty of the community and the few people there so I decided to stay. Auromarichi was born in my hut in Utility in March 1973. He received his name from the Mother. That is how I came to Auroville. It has been a fantastic gift offered by Mother, it changed my life forever."

Fanou's second place prize of \$150 was donated to Malarchi Boarding School.

Third Place: Devi Namashivya Namasiv

"This woman, by name Ādi, meaning 'the source' or 'the beginning' was part of the construction crew that built the house I now co-steward. Ādi manually broke brick by brick, and carried sand and mortar needed for the construction.

She did her work with a smile despite the fact that the mason bossed her around all the time. I reminisce about her presence quite often. She walked 3 miles in the morning to work and walked back home in the evening and I used to admire her patience, perseverance, strength and above all her simplicity. She was kind, tender and loving, qualities that came naturally and deeply from within her that she expressed wholeheartedly and with no reservations or pretensions. I feel grateful to be part of Auroville and the bioregion where modernity and ancientness can learn from one another and to experience and witness bricks getting broken from within and without."

Devi chose to donate her \$100 third place prize to Life Education Center (LEC).



Devi Namashivayam-3rd place



Exploring Auroville's Capacity to Flourish

by Matthew Andrews

Auroville has been called "The city the Earth needs." As a multicultural hub for innovation and experimentation, many of the world's biggest challenges are being addressed there on a micro scale. Cutting edge work is being done in the fields of reforestation, water management, arts and culture, health and wellness, green building, education, and more. But in order to truly benefit the Earth, Auroville will need to share its findings widely.

The question of how to effectively share what has been learned is complex. Individual projects have begun to connect with stakeholders outside of Auroville to work on big projects. Auroville Botanical Gardens is working with Ramco to turn abandoned mine sites into national parks where kids can learn about reforestation. Pitchandikulam contracted with the city of Chennai to rehabilitate a water body inside the city. And MG Ecoduties has worked with Tata on several projects using probiotics to clean water.

What would it take for more projects to get these kinds of contracts and begin to share their expertise in ways that the Earth needs? For example, could Wasteless or Sadhana Forest get contracts with governments or municipalities around the world to help them with waste management or eco-rehabilitation? Could Hemp Planet or Bamboo Center get paid to transform livestock grazing areas into high output fiber farms? Could Tree Care contract with the government of India to develop national standards for arboriculture and teach and certify arborists?

These are the kinds of questions that we at AVI-USA set out to answer through the project we called Exploring Auroville's Capacity to Flourish. We initiated the project at the beginning of 2021, and the results were presented to the Auroville community in October. The purpose of this research project was to explore the potential for Auroville's units to create positive change in the broader world. The study was headed up by two Aurovilians, Helen and Manjula and undertaken through SAIER's research platform.

Helen and Manjula began by taking a look at some established global indicators, like the UN Sustainable Development Goals and

Gross National Happiness, to create a set of criteria for evaluating existing projects. They identified key environmental and social issues with global impact, so they had a starting point for assessing whether Auroville is actually doing valuable work in these areas. The areas they focused on are education, climate change mitigation and adaptation, food and water security, ecosystem renewal, health and wellbeing, and responsible production and consumption, reduced inequality, and peacebuilding and human unity.

They conducted in-depth interviews with 55 Auroville projects with an even distribution in size and maturity. Of the 55, over 80% are directly addressing one or more of these areas, with many projects addressing several. Over 90% of the projects were specifically created with an aim to provide solutions for social and environmental issues as well as supporting the growth of Auroville.

It would be hard to find another community the size of Auroville with such a density of people aspiring to solve the world's most pressing problems. This initial finding demonstrates the breadth and scope of Auroville's important work in critical global areas at a time when each of these areas is facing increasing pressure. The health and wellbeing of future generations depends on addressing these global issues now, and Aurovilians are hard at work seeking solutions.

Most of these projects operate on a small scale, addressing big problems like climate change and ecosystem renewal through local reforestation, and food security through local food cultivation and promotion. Generally, even those who are already having a positive impact beyond Auroville and the bio-region have the potential and appetite to do more. Many projects saw external partnerships as an effective method for two-way sharing of knowledge and practices.

The research also sought to identify common challenges that these projects face in scaling their operations. These include difficulty accessing capital, difficulty attracting and retaining people with specific skill sets like marketing and management, and bu-



Ramanan at Auro Orchard

reaucratic hurdles related to Auroville's tax status and governing infrastructure.

The solutions that generated the most enthusiasm were in the area of shared leadership and business development training and resources, as well as access to legal advice and quality marketing/social media support. In fact, there was unani-

mous agreement that the immediate, pressing need is for capacity building and technical support. Most project leaders initially lacked the key skills needed to run projects and have never received any significant training since, other than 'learning by doing. This lack of support for projects has been an issue in Auroville for decades. It needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency if existing projects are to scale up and the next generation of leaders is to emerge.

The research showed that among successful Aurovillian project holders, there's a general sense that Auroville has strong potential to be a testing ground for new ideas - especially those which are complex and require an integral, multiperspective, systems based approach. Its size and diversity mean it is possible to easily connect many different spheres (energy, economy, built form, etc.) and test and prototype ideas. And the synthesis of different cultures and nationalities means that it's easier for global ideas to land and thrive in Auroville.

After nine months of work, Helen and Manjula have presented their findings to the community in a public forum, and provided a comprehensive written report to all the interviewees and focus group members. You can read the full report at aviusa.org/news/flourish. They also produced a video outlining their learning journey, which you can view at youtu.be/usSzjxj55x4. They will continue to work with key stakeholders to explore ways to address the primary barriers identified, especially in the areas of capacity building and funding access. And we will keep you posted about our ongoing work to expand Auroville's capacity to flourish. **If you have inspirations about this area of work, or want to volunteer your time and expertise, get in touch with us! Email info@aviusa.org.**





Give Trees For The Holidays

This year, when it's time to think about holiday gifts for those you love, we invite you to consider giving them a tree. One of Auroville's greatest accomplishments has been the re-establishment of the tropical dry evergreen forest ecosystem that once flourished all along the Coromandel Coast, but was decimated by deforestation throughout the last 600 years. Auroville continues to plant trees, both within the community and around the world.

The wisdom gained through researching, discovering, and nurturing hundreds of



Auroville tree nursery

species of trees and shrubs in a semi-desert environment is now being shared outside

Auroville by projects like Sadhana Forest, Botanical Gardens, and Pitchandikulam.

To give a tree, visit www.aviusa.org/givetrees, or send us a check and let us know who the trees are being planted for and their email address. For every \$2 you donate, one tree will be planted. And if you choose to make a Tribute donation, an email will be sent to the beneficiary letting them know how many trees will be planted in their honor. At a time when global climate change is on the minds of so many, your gift will warm their hearts and offset their carbon footprint at the same time!

Legacy for the Future

Dear Friends,

As a child of Auroville who came to Pondicherry when I was under a year old in 1969, I have always been grateful for the space my mother's generation created which allowed me to grow up in a completely uncharted manner. Those 1960s flower children opened the door for all of us to dream a little bigger and bolder and breathe kindness into our actions. This is the very



Binah and Jocelyn at Silence 1971

soil of Auroville which allowed an evergreen tropical forest to grow where little was expected from the soil but peanuts - quite literally!

Now, I am present to the fact that my once big strong Mama has aged into a softer version of the person who toughed it out with no running water or electricity until I was 18. I am also present to her aversion to paperwork

and practical planning for her twilight years and beyond. She would rather not think of a time when we may not be able to sit in the same room together and laugh uncontrollably.

In that spirit, I want to let all you golden friends of Auroville know that, as you put your affairs in order, if you intend to gift some of your worldly wealth to Auroville, I am here to help you handle the paperwork. If you have questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to call me about estate planning. And if you have already named AVI USA or Auroville in your will - please let us know so we can ensure that we honor your intentions to the letter. From

the depth of my heart I want to thank all of you mothers, fathers, uncles, aunts and friends who held space for the dream of an unlikely community to not only manifest but thrive for over 50 years.

Thank you! I love you! And I would love to hear from you! Please feel free to email me at binah@aviusa.org or call me at (831) 425-5620, or if you are wary of technology (like my mom), write to me at Auroville International USA, PO Box 188158, Sacramento, CA 95818.

Love,
Binah



Binah Thillairajah, AVI USA board member

Did you know that you can designate your estate plan gift to a specific unit or project in Auroville, or you can leave it to AVI USA to determine the best use of funds, depending on the needs in Auroville at the time of the gift?

This giving opportunity, which allows for the flexible meeting of both Auroville's current and future needs at the time the gift is received, is available by way of two options: you can designate "Auroville International USA" in your will or trust, or you can give through your retirement plan. All options require the use of AVI USA's Federal Taxpayer ID Number: 23-7360183.

How to Give

Option 1: Wills and Living Trusts

You can make a gift (bequest) through your will or living trust by either designating the entire residue or a percentage of the residue go to AVI USA, or by gifting a specific dollar amount. If you wish to restrict use of the funds to a project or other purpose, please

contact us at info@aviusa.org. That way we can work together to make sure that your wishes are legally and operationally workable and will be carried out. Please be sure to include AVI USA's Federal Taxpayer ID Number in your documents: 23-7360183.

Option 2: Retirement Plans

Beneficiary designations are often made by simply filling out a form. Language for such a designation would look like this: "Estate Plan Gifts for AVI USA or Auroville should be designated to Auroville International USA with our Taxpayer ID number 23-7360183, if requested."