

By Rob Harley



Aslima

*“Seldom do people discern
eloquence under a threadbare cloak”*

– Juvenal

THE YAKKUM REHABILITATION Centre sits on a volcano in Jogjakarta, Indonesia. Well, not exactly in the crater, but on the hard-yet-brittle rock where lava flowed and cooled not so many years ago.

Yakkum is a place where to be able-bodied is to feel out of place. Even the bronze statues in the fountain are of people with an arm or leg missing.

A colourful Kiwi gent by the name of Colin McLennan started Yakkum a few decades ago, after visiting Indonesia and being stunned by the number of disabled children who were unable to attend school or develop any kind of skill with which to earn a living.

“There was this kid – a bright young boy – sitting in the gutter, reading,” Colin recalls. “He was clearly crippled, but there was nothing wrong with his brain. So I asked him why he wasn’t at school with the other children. He told me that because his legs wouldn’t work, he wasn’t acceptable to the school – when the national anthem played, he couldn’t march round the flag-pole like the rest of the children.”

With mild but focussed outrage, Colin set about trying to figure out how boys like this might be taught, in a more accepting environment. Long story short – Colin beat the drum for finance all round the world, purchased the land, and built Yakkum.

Thousands of kids have been through its doors, and the support they get here enables them to learn, develop a sense of self-worth, and gain meaningful employment. I wandered through Yakkum’s corridors and grounds with a video camera, following Colin on his 20-year anniversary visit. Around

every corner, something to take your breath away ...

The armless accountant typing away with his toes. The woman with no hands doing fine needlework with her stumps. A paraplegic couple, who met here, got married and have raised a son who’s now their rickshaw driver; I found them giggling away like a pair of schoolkid-lovers.

And there, playing volleyball, with a smile that could melt a glacier, was a 15-year-old girl called *Aslima*.

The volleyball net was only a metre and a half off the ground, because Aslima and the other players were sitting on the concrete, due to their disabilities. The noise was raucous, the ball-skills impressive.

Aslima is here because she has no legs. Never has had. Her body ends at the lower end of her pelvis, with two lumps of skin where legs should have been. One of her arms has only one finger and a kind of a thumb at the end of it. Aslima’s mother took a drug which someone assured her would cause her to have a safe miscarriage.

Aslima, you see, was the child this family couldn’t afford to feed, so – like dirt-poor people in lots of places – they sought a way to not have to bring her into the world. The drug, unfortunately, has a cruel and very common side-effect, which means there’s no miscarriage; just a baby born with major defects – like no legs and only one properly functioning hand.

Children like Aslima tend to be hidden away by their families out of a sense of shame. Sometimes, when they’re little, these kids will be told: “Don’t worry, you’re just a bit behind the other children. Your legs will grow – eventually.”



So here she was – in mid-puberty – with still no legs, but at least in a place surrounded by others who were similarly marred by accidents of birth, disease or calamity.

I was transfixed by Aslima's smile, as she rocked back and forth expertly on her twin bizarre personal pedestals, and saw the flash of pride in her eyes as her one good hand smacked the ball across the net to score for her side.

The following morning, I saw her heading off for school in her wheelchair. An immaculately pressed white blouse, a blue pleated skirt flowing over the front of the wheelchair where legs should have been. Hair tied back, a look of serene happiness on her face. I followed her to the highschool – which these days is less hung-up about kids who can't march around the flagpole – and watched as she expertly removed text and exercise books from her bag with her crab-like hand.

Another day of learning with lots at stake, because, as she had confided in me when we'd arrived at school that morning, she really had big plans for the future. "I want to be a doctor," she had said confidently, before wondering if she'd been too forward, and cupping her hand to her mouth in a look of mock self-reproach.

I'm glad she didn't see the tears well up in my eyes – lest she interpreted that as an expression of pity. Because pity was the last thing I felt at that moment.

Cut to one last scene:

It was my final day at Yakkum, and I wanted to say goodbye to Aslima. I found her in the laundry. (These kids do all their own washing, cleaning and ironing – no pity parties here). Aslima was ironing one of her two casual dresses, a faded floral garment. The deformed arm holding the dress steady, her good hand deftly guiding the old iron into the right creases.

An interpreter – a delightful, elderly woman – sat with Aslima, because she had been expecting me, and had something she wanted to say. I had asked her earlier if she had any message she wanted me to pass on to disabled youngsters in New Zealand – back where “Mr Colin” had come from.

Aslima had asked for time to ponder that one.

Now, pausing to pick up her other dress and placing it carefully on the ironing board, she said, “Tell the disabled children where you come from to do two things. Find something each day that makes them grateful. And if they ever have anything spare, give it away to someone who needs it.”

And then, coyly, the smile I will take with me to my grave. Once again, I was undone on the inside.

Another dance with a wounded soul, another infinitely profound learning from someone whose simple philosophy of living shames my poverty of spirit, my self-centred, commodity-driven Western life.

I told Aslima’s story to an audience of young people, shortly after I came back from Indonesia. The reaction was OK. Appropriate noises of approval, even a tear or two.

About a year later, I met a young woman from that gathering, who pulled me aside and thanked me emotionally and profusely for my talk about Aslima.

Why?

“Most days – for nearly five years before I saw your pictures of that girl – I vomited up my meals, because I hated how I looked. I had chronic bulimia. When I watched that girl on your film and heard her speak, I was overwhelmed.

But instead of making me feel bad about myself, I suddenly found a determination rising within me.

“I thought if a girl like Aslima can be so happy, I can too. And I suddenly realised that a week had gone by and I hadn’t purged. And now it’s been a year. Thank you.”

Aslima.

Not a foolproof cure for bulimia – but a well of water on a dry landscape, nonetheless.

Maybe Henry David Thoreau said it best: *“However mean your life is, meet it and live it: do not shun it and call it hard names. Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Things do not change, we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts.”* ❖



Footnote: Colin McLennan died in 2007 at the age of 73. A wall plaque at Yakkum recognises his life. It reads:

‘A New Zealander who cared and made a difference’. From its small beginnings Yakkum is now a major complex where many thousands of people have been helped to build skills and live independently.

ASLIMA IS ONE OF MANY STORIES IN ROB HARLEY’S NEW BOOK, *THE HIGH VOLTAGE HEDGEHOG ... AND OTHER LESSONS IN PERSPECTIVE*. AVAILABLE IN ALL GOOD BOOKSTORES.