

# Colouring the Narrative:

## *How to Use Storytelling to Create Social Change in Skin Shade Ideals in India*

An e-Course From the Strategic Training Initiative  
for the Prevention of Eating Disorders

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## SYNOPSIS

In this teaching case, “Colouring the Narrative: How to Use Storytelling to Create Social Change in Skin Shade Ideals in India,” six characters are fighting against one common issue – colourism. In their different walks of life, one unifying message from society that stands out for all genders, but is particularly felt by girls and women, is that the lighter their skin, the better their prospects: More likely they will be taken to be affluent, powerful, educated, socially elevated, and just plain “beautiful” or desirable. And what if their skin shade is not already considered light enough by society’s colourist ideals? They are encouraged by ads, family, friends, and even strangers to seek out the “help” of creams, soaps, and a seemingly endless array of other consumer products sold with promises to lighten their dark skin.

The phenomenon of “colourism” is now fairly well understood but far less so is the problem of skin lightening (really, it’s “skin bleaching”) products and the health risks that consumers assume with these products and their dangerous chemical contents. Having personally been impacted by the issue, women like our teaching case protagonists Shistu, Aasra, Birma, Joy, and Yvonne, as well as young men like Raagam, are intent on fighting these practices amidst the media’s predatory messaging. In Shistu’s case, the young medical intern is struck with grief as young brides in Tara suffer “accidental deaths” due to undue blame for their families’ hardships and misfortune because of their skin shade. At the same time, Birma, a determined lawyer and esteemed newspaper columnist, addresses the issue of colourism on public platforms, arguing how the cultural obsession with marriage and “fair” skin is appalling and regressive. In one of these public talks, she meets Aasra, a motivated, young woman who runs an organization for young women abandoned by their families with a secret of her own. She is also joined by her friend, Joy, a community health educator who, on a day-to-day basis, holds workshops to educate young students on colourism. Visiting one of these workshops, students like Raagam and Yvonne question their own biases and hear of storytelling methods and organizations that serve a larger public health strategy to create societal change. Through these narratives, this teaching case examines the impacts of colourism on the physical and mental health of Indian adolescents and explores social change strategies to challenge skin shade ideals underlying colourism and skin-lightening cosmetic campaigns on societal, local, and interpersonal levels.

## **Acknowledgments and Funding**

This e-course was developed for the Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders by Reena Agrawal, Suman Ambwani, S. Bryn Austin, Tanvi Choudhury, Nadia Craddock, Megan Johnston of Bloom Learning Designs, Deepa Manjanatha, Ayesha McAdams-Mahmoud, Amanda Raffoul, Monique Santoso, and Kritika Tiwari. Illustrations were created by Tanvi Choudhury. Brief animated films were created by Medical Aid Films (Jemma Gander, Sheida Kiran, Louise Orton, Catherine McCarthy, and Claire Winter) with guidance from Reena Agrawal, S. Bryn Austin, Vinni Bhandari, Tanvi Choudhury, and Monique Santoso.

Support for this work has been provided by Anisa S. Bhandari and the Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders. S.B. Austin is supported by training grant T76-MC-00001 from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Administration, US Department of Health and Human Services.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

*In order of appearance:*

**Shistu** – 26-year-old woman who just graduated from medical school and is now interning at a public hospital.

**Aasra** – Head of AASRA, an organization for young women abandoned by their families, women’s rights activist.

**Birma** – Lawyer and columnist for one of the leading newspapers, interested in addressing a myriad of personal and professional issues affecting women. New faculty member at the College of Law Studies, campaigning against discrimination and the appalling cultural obsession with marriage.

**Joy** – Community health educator, studied Social Work and works on research projects on popular culture and the rights of the marginalized.

**Yvonne** – Nigerian exchange student on an exchange program in Tara, India.

**Raagam** – Indian student studying in Tara, India.

*Also appeared or mentioned in smaller, usually nonrecurring roles:*

**Unnamed young bride** – Young woman who took her own life.

**Young widower** – Husband to the unnamed young bride, devastated and angry about his wife’s death.

**Widower’s mother** – Mother to the young widower, abused and scorned the young bride for being dark and ugly, leading to her untimely death.

**Young banker** – Audience member attending Birma’s talk at the Young Changemakers Association.

**Consultant** – Audience member attending attending Birma’s talk at the Young Changemakers Association.

**Yajnas** – Aasra’s former fiancé and head of his family’s enterprise.

**Court clerk** – Clerk at the courthouse.

**Young girl** – One of the teenage students in Joy’s class.

**Young teen boy** – One of the teenage students in Joy’s class.

## ***Innocent Young Brides***

She lay on the hospital bed, lifeless. Yet another young life had been taken with impunity. Shistu, the young medical intern, couldn't take it anymore. This was the tenth case of "accidental death" she had listed in her medical register this month. Cause: cooking accident with 80% of her skin with third degree burns. Shistu called up her friend Aasra, a social activist she had met a few years ago.

"There is something happening in the town of Tara, 40 km from our medical clinic," Shistu said. "I have just registered another case of accidental death. Young, newly married girls are being brought in with burns while working in the kitchen. I have a niggling thought there is more to this and want to investigate."

"Did she say what happened or make a statement before she died?" asked Aasra.

"Two burly local policemen accompanied by a young policewoman were here but did not allow us to go near her while recording her statement. What can the young girl say in front of strangers? She said that she was cooking and she tripped over the cooking stove, which led to a spill of the inflammable kerosene (paraffin - used for domestic cooking) on her clothes. There was no one in the house. She lay there writhing in pain till her neighbors saw the fire and pulled her out."

"Why do you feel that is not the truth?" Aasra asked.

"Aasra, how can all the cases carry the same story?" Shistu said, exasperated. "In most cases families in towns have switched to cooking on gas stoves, however, conveniently kerosene stoves are said to be in use when such incidents occur."

"The gas cylinder could have got finished and till they purchased a new one, they may have started using their kerosene stoves, Shistu," Aasra said. "It's a regular practice in houses. I don't see anything suspicious."

"Yes, Aasra, to some extent what you say is true. But, when many cases of such 'accidents' tell the same story, the needle of suspicion points to something more than what meets the eye!" You must help me. There is more to these stories!" Shistu's voice sounded urgent and terribly disturbed.

"Calm down, Shistu, I will come over and we will talk this out," implored Aasra.

Twenty-six-year-old Shistu had just graduated from medical school and was interning in a public hospital, a prerequisite for her medical degree. In the same hospital, she had met Aasra, who had come in for a consultation, and learned of her activism. The two had kept in touch with each other ever since.

They both decided to visit a few of the families of the deceased young women. Since it had been several months since the deaths, life may have returned to normal in these households.

“Please accept our condolences,” Aasra said at the family home of one of the deceased.

“It’s very unfortunate and sad,” Shistu told the widower and his mother. “May you all have the strength to cope with this loss. Would you mind if we asked you a few questions?”

After the widower agreed to talk, Shistu asked, “Was it typical for your wife to be alone at home cooking on a kerosene stove? What happened?”

“When I left for work,” he said, “she had finished cooking on the gas stove since she had prepared my lunch box for me to take to work. Why she took down the other stove and what happened later, I am still unable to fathom.”

“Where were you?” Shistu asked the widower’s mother who replied that she had gone to the market. Though she sensed an unconvincing alibi, Shistu let it pass. Something had definitely happened between the two women after the widower had left for work.

The husband sat quietly with a vacant look in his eyes. After a few moments he broke down. Seeing her son behave so, his mother berated him. “Stop crying for her. She has been unlucky and brought us bad luck ever since she crossed the threshold of our house. Anyone who saw her face early in the morning was sure to have a bad day. First your father died, and then the field went barren. It was an evil eye she had cast upon us, and it’s just as well she’s dead,” she ranted.

“That’s not true,” blurted the young widower angrily. It was a rare occasion when he must have spoken to his mother in that tone as she was taken aback. “You’ve scorned her and abused her, albeit verbally, for being dark and ugly. Accused her parents for not giving you enough dowry and cheating you by palming off their dark-skinned daughter to your son. But she was a good girl and took care of all of us. You left no stone unturned to break her. She had no choice!”

The mother angrily huffed out and returned with a small bundle of what may have been the young deceased's belongings and hurled it at her son. The contents lay strewn across the floor. Of all the things the young widower picked up was a tube of 'fairness' cream he had bought for her at the carnival a few months before the tragedy!

***Birma: Advocates for Young Changemakers***

The Mumbai monsoon sky was overcast when Birma received a call from the Young Changemakers Association of Mumbai, South District, an initiative taken by students striving to connect and enhance communication among the youth with people who were making a difference in society. Leaders of the Association invited her to deliver a keynote address at their annual program on "Commercial Exploitation of Marriage in Advertising in India."

As a lawyer and columnist for one of the leading newspapers, Birma had been actively addressing subjects that affect women's lives from personal to professional and covering mental or physical abuse or discrimination. She had been vocal on several women's issues, particularly on how media was creating a harmful image of an 'ideal woman'. She had actively written petitions regarding skin products that were aggressively being promoted through advertising agencies. Her concern was that women were unashamedly being projected as unworthy and skin care products, among other things, were being promoted as their savior.

Birma had just started her teaching career at the College of Law Studies and was the faculty member responsible for the student body. On the day of the Changemakers event, Birma addressed a large audience of students, health specialists, counselors, medical practitioners, media persons, and social workers. She focused her remarks on ads for skin lightening products and its direct effect on consumers.

"These ads promote a warped sense of self-worth and hinder capable men and women from achieving their intellectual and professional potential," she told the audience. "I fervently appeal to you all to raise your voice against the Perpetuation of advertising falsehoods promoting dangerous skin-lightening products. We should all find it insulting to be told by the advertising industry that our prospects in career and marriage are dictated by the lightness and shades of our skin colour.

Birma did not want to offer any solutions. She only hoped to draw the audience's attention to issues ingrained in the culture, particularly the focus on skin lightening as an avenue to commercialize marriage. She

blamed traditional matrimonial columns in newspapers, websites, and dating apps, which amplify misguided parental fears regarding their child's choice of spouse.

“‘Wanted Brides: 'fair', slim, beautiful, convent-educated, homely, cultured girl for...’ or ‘suitable match for handsome boy’ implying he is 'fair' and therefore handsome, so the girl should be 'fair' and thus ‘suitable,’” Birma noted. “Sites are rampantly strewn with pictures of young women and men with fair skin seeking partners, and the products advertised range from 'fairness' creams, bleaching creams and cleansers, to ‘blood purifiers’ and face masks guaranteed to make your face and other body parts desirable and shades lighter.”

Birma argued that the cultural obsession with marriage and 'fair' skin was appalling and regressive. It positioned both single life and dark skin as curses. She encouraged the audience to expose the lies.

As a concluding remark she said, “It is now important for youth to actively participate in these discussions because as we talk, the markets are being flooded with similar products for men. Should companies be allowed to disseminate such false notions of beauty and erode basic values? Today the 'fairness' industry is a 300 Crore Rupees business with the intention of ‘beautifying’ our women folk at the cost of their health - emotional, mental, and physical. And this responsibility lies with all of us together!”

Birma sat down to have a drink of water before fielding a barrage of questions from her young and diverse audience.

A young banker asked, “Ma’am, if 'fair' women can want tanned skin, what is wrong with a dark-skinned girl desiring to become 'fair'?”

“How do we recognize symptoms of low esteem that could be based on colour concerns in the brief interactions we have from some of our reluctant patients?” asked a social worker from a public hospital.

A consultant for a local advertising agency asked, “Corporates have to run their business houses and have the right to advertise. How can you take away that right from them?”

Birma did her best to respond 'fairly.' “I think advertising does not need to be derogatory. It's possible for ads to be empowering and uplifting. We must create counter narratives and build zero tolerance towards such internalized notions of superiority of skin colour. Ironically, in our culture, women are considered Lakshmi (goddesses of wealth and prosperity) and Shakti (power), but in practice women are stripped of all dignity and rebuked if they are not 'fair'- skinned!” concluded Birma.



## ***Aasra's Secret***

Aasra went to meet Birma after the talk.

“Ma’am, I run an organization, AASRA (after my own name, it means support and shelter too) for young women who have been abandoned by their families. I’d like to invite you to meet my staff. Will you come?”

Something about her made Birma accept the invitation instantly. For a while, after they met, the grit and a restless determination in Aasra’s eyes lingered on in Birma’s memory. They met at Aasra’s office a few days later, in the business hub of Bandra in Mumbai. Her office, overlooking the vast Arabian Sea, had an invigorating vibe to it.

Aasra, straightened the runaway strands of her hair, tucked in her veil tightly and shared her story. “I was a smart, young professional girl by Indian standards. 'Fair', tall, slim, well- educated. After I completed my Masters in Chemistry from an international university, I landed a good job in a large multi-national company. My job required me to travel, which was manna for my wanderlust.

“But my family was very concerned. With all the studies and the high-paying job, how would I find a suitable match in our own community? The ultimate in a woman’s life! Since I hadn’t met anyone yet, I handed over this responsibility to my parents on the condition that I would continue working after my marriage. And thus began the weekend ritual – of matchmaking through ads and websites. Several potential families were met and, to my surprise, I was soon engaged.

“Yajnas had studied in one of the top management institutes of the country and subsequently got a job with a large corporate business house. However, coming from a business family, it was not long before he joined his father. The lure of being your own boss at an early age and running your own enterprise is a heady feeling!

“Initially, all was well. Or so it seemed. I noticed that every time I had to travel, Yajnas became possessive and wanted to control my movements and the people I was out with. He would tell me to cover my face to prevent my 'fair' skin from getting tanned and introduce me to his friends as the 'fair' one. In a strange way he felt validated as a capable young man who besides everything, also had a 'fair' skinned fiancé. He started following me and even wanted to install a tracker on my mobile phone! It was out of his concern and love for me, he assured me. But his possessiveness that at first was endearing, soon began to stifle me.

“Despite many conversations and assurances, I decided that I could not continue with this relationship any further and called the engagement off. Yajnas was shell-shocked. He told me he couldn’t face his family and friends. ‘How dare YOU do this to me?!’ Very clearly, it was only the male prerogative to reject and discard!

“After a few days of silence, he called me. ‘Aasra,’ he pleaded, ‘meet me just one more time so that we can part as friends.’ I agreed.

“He was open to discussing the problems, promised to be less controlling and was determined to change himself for me. I liked the fact that we could still talk to each other, and he seemed genuinely interested in building our relationship based on trust, respect and love. Then, just as we got up to leave, he gave a parting shot: ‘If you will not marry me, then no one else will marry you!’ and threw a bottle of acid on my face and left me scarred forever...”

“It’s been 13 years now. But I am a warrior,” she concluded quietly, unveiling her face.

Birma had suspected this all along. It was the reason she had so willingly agreed to meet up with Aasra, to hear her story and extend support to the young girl behind that veiled face!

### ***Birma’s Courthouse Fight***

Birma stood outside the courthouse, a heritage site styled in Gothic architecture. Bracing herself for the impending hearing she took in a deep breath and stepped inside the imposing building. Her mind raced back to the time she had submitted an online signature campaign for which she had received overwhelming support. She had also filed petitions demanding action be taken against companies selling beauty products that offered to lighten skin shade and to address the beauty standards being set by the advertising and film industries. Her campaign was specifically against the advertisements on marriage, which portrayed women to be submissive, accommodating and dependent on men in their lives and how their lives could change once the shades of their skin became lighter by using their product.

Her petition had hit the headlines of the afternoon newspapers and, as the date of the hearing inched closer, the media was abuzz. TV channels cautiously talked about it as did some of the newspapers and social media. But since they all depended on advertisements for their survival, they didn’t want to ruffle too many feathers. Yet, they could not turn a blind eye to the brewing storm this issue had raised.

“Case no. 147 to be heard now” called the court clerk from his table inside the courtroom. Birma walked into a crowded room with determined steps.

“My Lordship,” Birma began, after being granted permission to present her case. “Our Constitution is based on principles of Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and, through its Directive Principles, it guides the State to secure a social order for the promotion of the welfare of the people. Several articles in our Constitution assure us our basic human rights –Article 14 (Right to Equality), Article 15 (Prohibition of Discrimination), and Article 21 (Right to Life). While these exist in law, they are being violated in practice.

“It is these very rights that I seek to invoke.

“If we are all equal in the eyes of law, why are we discriminating on grounds of skin colour and reducing people, especially women and certain social groups with dark skin, to being less human by condemning, condescending and denying access to basic dignity of life and opportunity to develop fully? People with dark shades of skin are considered dirty, polluted and evil. They are shunned from auspicious occasions, humiliated and ostracized. Such ideas are being disseminated through the media, especially advertising agencies. ‘Fairness’ creams and other similar products by companies are shamelessly flouting rules and inculcating the need to be ‘fair’ skinned to get a good marriage partner, happiness and a meaningful life.

According to Article 15, if we should not be discriminating then why are certain employment opportunities denied to people with darker coloured skin? This is dehumanization.

There should be some orders holding The Advertisement and Branding Council of India and celebrities accountable for the products they are endorsing in the public domain.”

Birma spoke passionately for a large section of humanity who deserved to be recognized for their worth.

As she walked away from the court, looking for a café to calm her emotionally charged nerves she looked out for Joy, who she had called the previous day.

“So, how did it go?” asked Joy.

“We will have to wait at least for a few days for the verdict,” Birma replied. “Anyway, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Mindsets and attitudes are deeply entrenched in the human psyche and take time to change.”

Joy was aware of Birma's case. They were old friends having completed their graduation from the same college. Later, while Birma went to Law school, Joy pursued a postgraduate degree in Social Work. Together they had worked on several research projects on popular culture and rights of the marginalized.

"Education is the best agency to bring about social change," Birma said with a smile. "Joy, let us once again join forces to create an activist-based environment with your students and empower them to pay it forward."

"Sure, Birma, let's meet next week after I return from the seminar with my students," Joy said.

### **Joy: Community Health Educator**

Joy, a community health educator, was taking her entire class for an off-site seminar to introduce town life to the city bred. Tara was about 90 km from the city of Pune in Maharashtra. A group of teenagers -- 50 girls and 15 boys all between 16-18 years -- sleepily boarded the bus, but soon started playing antakshari (a medley of songs sung in a loop starting from the last alphabet of each song sung) as the bus crossed the city limits.

Since Tara was downhill from their city, they burst into "She'll be coming down the mountains when she comes..." and sang along the first verse to end with S which had to be the first alphabet for the next song, "So long, farewell..." and so it went for a while till the repertoire of Bollywood songs began.

"Gori, gori, gori, gori, dekha karo" (roughly translated as- "'fair' one please look...") "Gori hain kalaiyan, pehna de hari hari chudiyaa" ('fair' are my hands, make me wear green bangles – implying marry me) "Yeh kaali kaali aankhen, yeh gore gore gaal" (black are your eyes and 'fair' is your skin)... it went on and on.

"BOLLYWOOD!" Joy moaned.

Joy sat silently through the journey, but the songs the students were singing made her squirm. Did they even know what they were singing so joyfully, she wondered, or how these thoughts were being internalized by them? She made a mental note to change the opening session of the seminar to a reflective one.

Once they reached the Tara Convention Centre, the students assembled and were reminded of the seminar's focus: Media's role in the Development of our Self-Image and Esteem.

Welcoming them to Tara, Joy plunged straight into the introductory session. "Any idea why this town has been in the news recently?" The students' responses were varied.

“Recently, there have been many deaths of young brides here in Tara. We’re here to find out the brutal facts about these deaths and as media students to understand our responsibility in reporting realities,” one student responded.

“Yes, and while you are exploring these cases ask yourselves where we get our ideas of beauty from and is there a link to our self-worth, beauty, skin colour and relationships?” said Joy, bringing the conversation closer home.

“Ma’am, speaking for myself, my idea of beauty comes from the films and programs I watch online. But, that’s harmless, I think,” commented one of the young girls.

A young teen boy chipped in. “It’s very confusing and complicated, Ma’am. With technology and social media having shrunk the globe, we have, on the one hand, greater accessibility to products, visuals and ideal body images to subscribe to, while on the other hand, several voices dismissing these false notions of success or beauty and promoting positive ideas of self. It all depends on your social environment, I feel. And this is something even we boys are grappling with.”

Not surprised, Joy pursued her soft inquisition. “Any idea what were the lyrics of the songs you all were singing implying? Think about it, make a list of songs you like and check if they too are loaded with innuendos. Do you think songs perpetuate social behavior? If patriotic songs can arouse feelings of patriotism, then other genres can be instrumental in inculcating ideas that affect the human psyche, self-esteem and self-image, right?”

Joy divided them into small groups with instructions to prepare a campaign to be executed in the town school the next day. “Use social media extensively, in the most creative way, study other conservative media forms too – audio, audio-visual, print, comics, books, cartoons, even philately, too, to reach out to the town folk through this campaign. This is your opportunity to challenge your own thoughts and create a new world for yourselves.”

Without a moment to lose they plunged straight into the subject. Chaos ensued as everyone had an opinion, an idea, a thought. And no one was listening to the other!

“Which aspect of the subject do we want to discuss? The idea of colour and self-esteem, colourism, media responsibility, products for skin care, attitudes, gender bias, who should be held responsible?” One group

was animatedly discussing while another debated on visuals, ads, products or some basic ideas of how we see ourselves.

It was quite a noisy start.

Yvonne, was sitting quietly listening to her peers, some sensible, others reactive. As a young Nigerian student on an exchange program to India, she drew attention to herself, “I come from a country in which people have dark skin. I love my colour, so I’m shocked to see how in my country these products have found a willing market. Why are we dissatisfied with our skin shades?”

“I don’t think there is any harm in using these products’ ‘We are over-thinking this. It’s no big deal’ It’s our choice to use them or not,” a couple of students responded almost in unison.

“True, but we use them because there is a quality of life being offered. It’s an aspirational bait,” another student argued.

“Everyone aspires to be successful and desires affection,” Yvonne said. “These products play upon such human emotions and pit people against each other. It’s exclusionary and discriminatory and in principle against the larger human good, especially for women.”

Yvonne turned around to the boys and candidly asked, “Do you think of how your girlfriend should look or maybe who she should look like? Or about your own skin colour? Do you also want to have a lighter skin shade? Did you ever feel the need for it till these companies and celebrities flooded the market with products that will make you 'fair' and handsome?”

Unexpectedly, drawn into this conversation directly, Raagam, one of her classmates, gave himself a few moments to respond. “I have probably not been conscious of my responses to people based on their skin colour. But when I now look around me, I can see that I have definitely been biased, maybe even dismissive of some of my friends only because I felt they were not good enough as they are dark skinned. And I must now seek the source of how these ideas become part of me?”

“What was your reaction when you saw me?” Yvonne could not resist asking.

“I stand guilty,” Raagam sheepishly replied but recovering immediately, he asked the girls with a twinkle in his eyes, “How many of you would want a 'fair'-skinned partner?”

But Yvonne’s question had taken him by surprise. The floodgates had been thrown open. Raagam sat thinking. Was this bias only against women or did men too face it too? If so, where and when? Did it matter in the workplace, in occupations pursued or even in promotions or matrimony? If he was to advise a friend about a career option would he be conscious of his skin shade while recommending options? Raagam realised that this bias was real and harboured by many, probably unknowingly. He was uncomfortable and spoke up and shared his thoughts with the group

Before the group could answer, Yvonne set the perspective for the group. “I think this is an interesting point for us to start with demystifying and deconstructing the narrative of colour right here.”

Others chipped in: “Let’s also talk about what skill set do we as a group have, what are the different ways we can present this, for example. We could use social media to consciously create alternative narratives for our ideas of beauty to start with.”

“Images constantly uploaded on Instagram, Twitter or messaging sites, even the several apps for dating should be scrutinized and critically dealt with,” Joy reminded them, “and extend your reach to other social media platforms the youth are using today across the globe.”

“Let’s be a bit more organized and understand whose voice we are representing and who are we speaking to. We must identify the stakeholders and pitch the narrative to them. Request celebrities who have taken a stand against colour discrimination to speak more often and share their personal stories which we could all relate.”

“Then maybe we should look at how this process of socialization starts with the family and education.”

“You’re absolutely right. When I now think of the books we read, the stories we are told, the songs that are sung and the visuals that bear down upon us from huge advertising boards in public places, I feel it begins from probably even before we were born!”

“Cut the dramatics, and focus on the present!”

“I’ve read about Women of Worth (WOW) and [Dark Is Beautiful](#) and their [Colourism Ends With Me](#) campaign. They are doing some incredible work. We should probably reach out to such organizations and collaborate.”

“That sounds like a good idea. We all need real life role models. And to know that there are organizations actually working in this field is very encouraging.”

Excitement and purpose permeated the air. Joy felt a sense of accomplishment as her students went into overdrive, building upon their realization and a new uplifting perspective.

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