

The Island in India

A remarkable school in rural India takes inspiration from the Loomis Chaffee experience of its founder, William Bissell '84.

by Becky Purdy



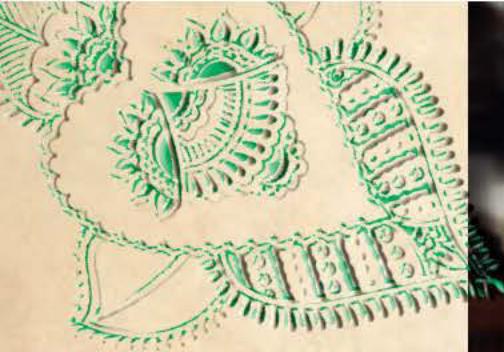
It TAKES A FULL DAY of driving to travel from New Delhi's teeming streets to the village of Bali, Rajasthan, in the rural desert region of western India. From Bali, the main road stretches east toward the Aravalli mountain range visible on the horizon, and a single-lane, dirt-packed side road carries travelers the few remaining kilometers to the airy, one-story buildings and open acreage that form the campus of The Fabindia School.

Children from preschoolers to 12th-graders arrive each morning by bus from villages and rural homes within a 30-kilometer (18-mile) radius and gather in the school yard before the class day begins. The younger students kick a makeshift ball around the clearing, their happy game filling the air with dust and children's voices. Groups of older girls convene, chatting, in the shade of a few trees. Other students wait quietly, hanging out.

The school day opens with an assembly at an outdoor stage, where the students, dressed in the school uniform of dark-green skirts or pants and pale green collared shirts, line up for announcements and occasional performances. Then the students and their teachers disperse to their classrooms indoors for the first lessons of the day.

Although the start to the day may seem routine, there is nothing ordinary about the opportunity that Fabindia offers its 1,000 students and their families. In a region





where high-quality, affordable education reaches few children and especially few girls, this nonprofit, nonreligious, private school provides a holistic, local, English-based education to boys and girls and heavily subsidizes their tuition so that families can afford it.

The Fabindia School is the brainchild of William Bissell '84, who, along with his father, John, founded the school 20 years ago in the hopes of empowering the local people. Many of the artisans and craftspeople in the region supply goods to the large retail company, Fabindia Overseas Pvt., that John started half a century ago to export hand-crafted fabric products. William took over the helm of the company in 1999, but from the beginning, the company has pursued a "double bottom line" — dual goals of making a profit and helping the community — and The Fabindia School is an extension of that social and cultural mission. The company aims to include rural communities in the process of prosperity. Through the creation of economic cooperatives of artisans and craft workers, the company enables the rural poor to become financial stakeholders and to build access to markets that previously had been out of their reach. And by providing the opportunity for English education in an engaging learning environment, the school also helps open doors for young people in the rural community.

William chose the state of Rajasthan as the location for the school after living for several years in Jodhpur, the second-largest city in the state,



William Bissell '84, founder of The Fabindia School Photo: The Fabindia School

and working with artisans and cooperatives in the region. Rajasthan had the lowest literacy rate in all of India in 1991, the year before the school's founding. According to government census figures, 38.55 percent of the state's residents older than age 6, and just 20.44 percent of the female residents in that age range, could read and write. (Since then, literacy rates have improved in the state to 67.1 percent of all residents older than 6 and 52.7 percent of female residents older than 6, but the rural state still has some of the lowest literacy rates in the country.)

William knows that an inspiring education can transform a person. He himself is a case in point, as he is quick to note. After attending school in India for most of his childhood, he arrived at Loomis Chaffee as a junior in 1982 and blossomed from a self-described "duffer," a mediocre student with little excitement for school, into a fascinated and motivated

learner who connected with his teachers and seized educational opportunities. He modeled The Fabindia School on what he saw as the essence of Loomis Chaffee: a place, in his words, where "teachers were passionate about teaching and the students were switched on."

High Standards, Holistic Education

From its inception, The Fabindia School has sought and trained faculty members with a passion for educating young people and strived to keep the teacher-to-student ratio low. Today that ratio hovers around 20-to-1. The school also encourages equal educational opportunity for girls and boys "in a culture where most parents who can afford an English medium school would send only their sons," as the school website explains. Tuition for boys at The Fabindia School is half

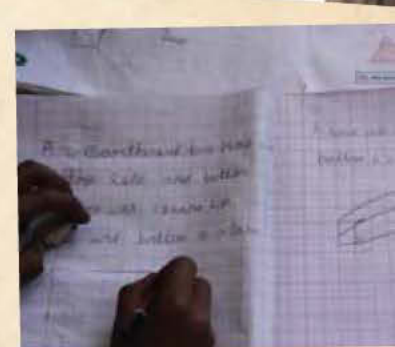
of the actual cost of each child's education; for girls, tuition is one-quarter of the actual cost.

The school provides a strong academic foundation but also emphasizes a holistic education. Along with academic courses, the school offers opportunities to participate in sports, theater, debate, music, community service, the arts, environmental projects, and cross-cultural experiences. Field trips take students to other parts of the state of Rajasthan and beyond, and visitors from near and far spend time at the school to teach, share their stories, and contribute to their educations.

Last spring, 16 Loomis Chaffee students and two faculty members spent a week at The Fabindia School building a trench for a water-collection system and helping to teach the younger Fabindia students. Some of the LC students also spent time at Fabindia's satellite preschools in nearby villages. Erby Mitchell, LC assistant head of school for enrollment, visited Fabindia in 2010.

The partnership between Fabindia and Loomis Chaffee continued this school year when two Fabindia students, Shaily Jain and Shefali Jain, came to the Island as exchange students. The two 15-year-old girls, who share a last name but are not related to one another, have embraced the opportunity to learn and make friends at an American school and to share their culture with the Loomis community. They live in Mason Hall with other junior and senior girls, and their Loomis courses include junior English, algebra, U.S. History, psychology and religion electives, and Water-





Photos: Elizabeth Tomlinson

Deep roots in the culture and countryside of India ground the school, and connections with the wider world add to the vibrancy of the Fabindia education. The photographs above depict scenes from the daily life of the school and surrounding villages as well as glimpses of the engaging experiences of Loomis Chaffee students during a service trip to Fabindia last spring.



color Painting. Shefali played on the III soccer team this fall, and both girls are taking Hip-Hop Dance for their winter sport. In October during the Indian celebration of Diwali, the girls shared some of the traditions and background of this important and colorful holiday in their country. In an evening program in Founders Chapel, they lit traditional candles, spoke to the audience about the holiday, and shared images of brilliantly illuminated villages at home during Diwali. Loomis breaks for Thanksgiving and the winter holidays gave Shaily and Shefali the chance to experience some American holiday traditions as they stayed with local families.

Shaily and Shefali return to India at the end of the Loomis winter term, which is near the end of the school year at home. They sit for their final exams a couple of weeks after they return. Although they have been trying to prepare for the tests while on the Island, they have found little time for the extra studying on top of their Loomis Chaffee courses and activities. Neither of them, however, would trade their LC experiences for more exam preparation time.

Many Fabindia students applied to participate in the exchange with Loomis Chaffee, and Shaily and Shefali say spending seven months on the Island has been one of the most important opportunities of their young lives. As Shefali says, the experience "attracted me because, here, I can learn so many different things that I could [not] have possibly learned living there. For example, psychology, learning hip-hop, to be on a soccer



Fabindia exchange students Shaily Jain and Shefali Jain demonstrate a Diwali tradition during a celebration of the Indian holiday in Founders Chapel. Photo: John Groo

team. I have loved it."

Shaily still can hardly believe the path her life has taken. "Studying at Fabindia changed my life completely. I feel lucky to be at Fabindia, a light by Mr. William Bissell in rural Rajasthan," she says. "I feel proud to be a part of the Loomis community now. Fabindia made my dream come true — that was Loomis."

Both girls have attended Fabindia since they were 2 years old. Shaily is from the town of Bali, where the school is located, and Shefali lives in Falna, eight kilometers (about five miles) from the school. Neither has attended another school in India, but they do not take for granted the opportunities that Fabindia has placed within their grasp. They describe their school as a welcoming, nurturing environment in which all students feel they can learn, grow, and succeed. "It is the only school in the area that provides the students, no matter which part or culture they come from, [with

the chance] to interact with the world," Shaily says. Shefali also appreciates the whole-person approach of the school: "Fabindia School [does not] just focus on studies, but also focuses on how to make students perfect in every field."

The LC Connection

William Bissell based his vision for The Fabindia School on his Loomis Chaffee experience, a two-year educational journey.

William grew up in Delhi, India. His father, a Connecticut native, first moved to India in 1958 on a Ford Foundation grant to work with a government handicrafts institution. John married an Indian woman, Bimla, and after his grant ran out, he stayed on in India to start the Fabindia textile exporting company. William was born a few years later.

Until his junior year in high school, William attended a private school near the family's home in Delhi. "I didn't

enjoy my classes," he recalls, and his grades were poor. The schooling was rigorous, he says, but its approach was to "cram answers and knowledge" in years of preparation for national college entrance examinations. Unfortunately, he says, the educational system in India continues to take this approach. "It's a system designed to produce very technically competent students," he says, and scores on college entrance exams make student success easy to measure and college admission cutoffs straightforward. "In a way it has a kind of brutal fairness to it" he says. But he identifies what he sees as deeper problems: The teachers and the students lack passion for what they are teaching and learning, and there is little room for creative thinking or development of individual talents.

John, who had attended Brooks School in Massachusetts, wanted his son to experience a prep school in the United States, so he brought William to look at American schools, including Loomis, for his junior and senior years. William's family has close ties with Loomis Chaffee. Many of his American cousins attended Loomis, his uncle James English Jr. '44 served as chairman of the Board of Trustees, and his aunt Catherine Cox Reynolds '45 graduated from Chaffee and also served on the Board of Trustees. William believes his father also encouraged him to apply to Loomis Chaffee because, though far from India, he would be near John's parents, who lived in Avon.

William remembers interviewing at several schools that were





Photos: Elizabeth Tomlinson

→ The energy of The Fabindia School is captured in the faces of the students and their visitors from Loomis Chaffee. In addition to visiting and volunteering at the school, LC students and faculty chaperones last March toured temples and forts, went on a leopard safari (Jeep photograph), spent time in New Delhi, and experienced other sights, sounds, and tastes of India.

concerned about his C-minus average and apparent lack of academic success. His many other interests, however, caught the attention of then-admission associate Katherine Follansbee during his interview at Loomis, and the school, seeing his potential, accepted him.

After years of schooling in India, William encountered not only a major culture shift, but also an entirely different approach to education when he arrived at Loomis. "I realized the teachers were there because they loved to teach," and the students were engaged in the learning, he recalls. In this atmosphere, William blossomed intellectually.

From James "Grim" Wilson, a longtime history teacher, William learned the art of nailing down an argument with strong evidence. "He said, 'There are no right answers. If you have an opinion and are willing to do the research and back it up with facts, well, I'm willing to have my mind changed,'" William recalls. To this day, William remains unafraid of controversial ideas and is known in business circles as a tough negotiator as well as an innovative thinker.

From his gruff math teacher, David Haller, William learned to value knowledge in its many

forms. William was not a particularly strong math student, but he connected with Mr. Haller because they shared an interest in war history. William was fascinated with war memorabilia, and Dave had driven an ambulance with the American Field Service for the British Army in Burma during World War II. William struck up a conversation about the war with his math teacher after class one day. "David Haller was not the most cuddly guy. He was abrupt," William recalls. But their conversation that day led to an ongoing dialogue throughout William's Loomis years. His teacher's keen interest in his ideas made a strong impression. "He valued my knowledge even though my knowledge didn't exactly fit the subject he was teaching," William says. And David later told William, "I wish I'd gotten to know you sooner because you could've been a good math student instead of being allergic to math."

During a Loomis in Russia program during spring break of his junior year, William developed a lifelong friendship with then-faculty member Nathan Longan, whose origins in Billings,

Montana, fascinated William.

And from his experiences in the arts and athletics at Loomis, William gained an appreciation for the broader elements of education. He remembers the infectious passion for photography of Walter Rabetz, head of the Visual Arts Department when William was a student. He acquired a lifelong love of running from his participation on the cross country team. Coach Sally (Zimmer) Knight taught him perseverance and pacing, he says, and he continues to run regularly, where ever his work takes him. When he tires, he hears Sally's voice in his head, urging him: "Shuffle. Shuffle. Don't stop."

Creating Stakeholders

As he witnessed firsthand the powerful difference that a school can make in a young person's life, William decided that one day he would repay the faith that Loomis had in his potential by providing a transformative education for children in India. After graduating in 1984 — the year of the famous June floods that forced evacuation by boat and cancellation



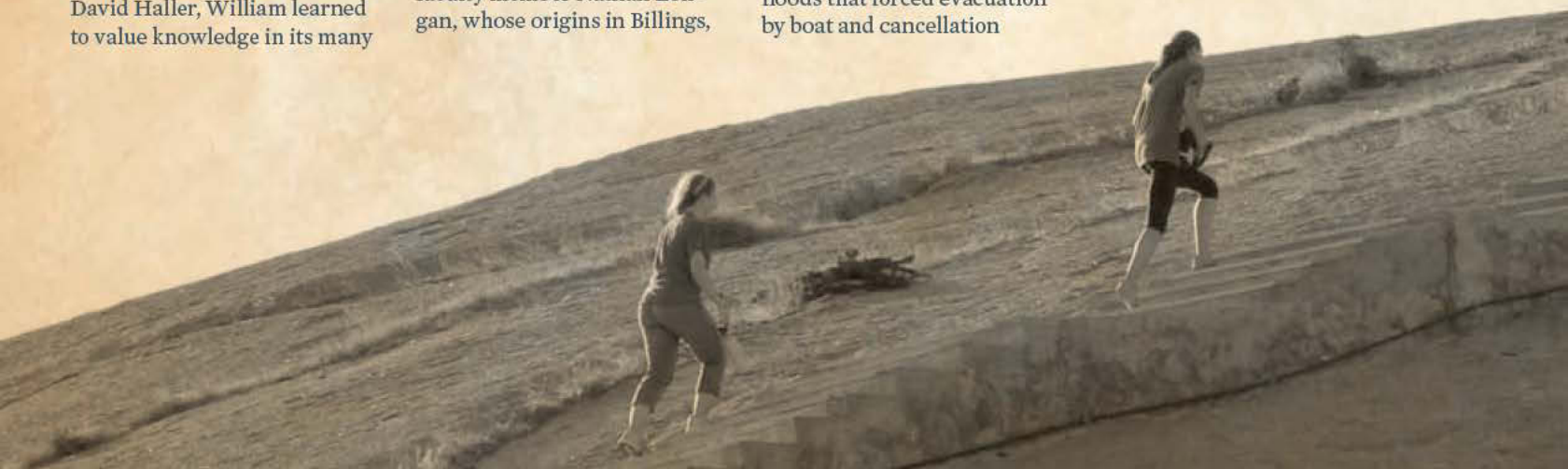
During a trip to Asia this fall, Loomis Chaffee Head of School Sheila Culbert and Associate Head for External Relations Nathan Follansbee met the board of The Fabindia School for a lunch party. Pictured are Ravi Kaimal, Kamini Prakash, Nat, Sheila, A.K. Shiva Kumar, and Sudeshna Chatterjee. Photo: The Fabindia School

of exams — William attended Wesleyan University, where he earned his bachelor's degree in 1988. He then returned to India to work with his father's company.

Four years later, he and his father founded The Fabindia School with 11 students.

For the first six or seven years, the company's profits funded the school through a charitable trust. Now, 20 years since its founding, the school has 1,000 students on its main campus, four satellite preschools, and enough of an endowment to run the school and subsidize students' tuition without funding from the company. The John Bissell Scholars Fund, named for William's father, who died in 1998, also provides scholarships for girls.

The school provides supplemental funding for families that cannot afford even the subsidized tuition, but everyone pays some amount because having a financial stake is empowering, William explains. "People can come up with some money. It changes the whole relationship with the school," he says. "It's a very different stakeholder who pays to go to school." The parents take a more active role



in their children's educations, and they demand service and hold the school accountable. The school is better because of these checks and balances, he says.

As the school grew, it expanded to include more grade levels,

and the school now goes through 12th grade. Eight classes of students have graduated and moved on, many to college and beyond. One graduate is attending India's top law school. Another runs a hotel. Another is establishing a stud farm. Others are pursuing advanced

degrees. "It's amazing to see how these kids have flowered," William reflects. "If I hadn't gone to Loomis, that school wouldn't have been created, and those children wouldn't have been educated." 🍀



LC students and faculty chaperones hike to the Hinglaj Mata Temple.