

JELA Artificial Limb Work Camp:

You Can't Walk Away Unchanged

“You can't walk away from an experience like this unchanged, even superficially.”

The speaker is ELCA missionary Jackie Bencke, a volunteer at JELA's 2007 Artificial Limb Work Camp at the Comprehensive Rural Health Project in Jamkhed, India.

2007 marked the third consecutive year that JELA sent volunteers to Jamkhed, where the CRHP operates on various levels – in health, micro-finance, agriculture and more – to promote the well-being of the region.

One CRHP program is the construction of lightweight and low-cost artificial limbs, which enable local farmers to continue their work in the fields even despite the loss of a leg. Such loss – either due to injury, infection or snakebite – is not uncommon in the Jamkhed area.

Prosthetic devices from abroad prove too costly and too wieldy for field use. Shaped from aluminum, the lighter and more flexible CRHP limbs are more practical, but need replacing every three to four years. CRHP limb production is thus ongoing, with each leg costing approximately \$20 US dollars.

Jackie and 18 other JELA volunteers spent part of the week hammering and shaping aluminum to make one artificial limb each. As they worked, the limb recipients sat nearby, silently watching -- silent because none of the volunteers spoke Marathi, the chief language of Jamkhed, and few recipients spoke English or Japanese. The camp was therefore more than simply matching volunteers with recipients; it was one of connecting cultures, with eyes meeting quietly over the pounding of hammers.



ELCA missionary Jackie Bencke at the Comprehensive Rural Health Project

Jackie says that at first she did not know what to think of this gap in communication. “The faces that look at you are not always smiling. Are they suspicious? Or thankful? You have to build the relationship from ground zero.”

The silence, she says, led her to think deeply of why she had come to India.

With each stroke of her hammer, she began to offer

a silent prayer for the limb recipient and his family and the difficult lives they lead. While her hands built a leg, her prayer built a bridge of caring and she came to describe Jamkhed as a place that “transforms your heart.”

The sweat of Jackie and other volunteers – always under the helpful instruction of regular CRHP workers – was rewarded at week's end in a ceremony in which volunteers presented and fit each recipient with his new artificial leg. The men came to the chair on crutches but walked away on their own. The evening then continued with speeches, music and, yes, many smiles.

Now back in Kumamoto, Japan, where Jackie directs the choir at Kyushu Lutheran College and husband Patrick teaches English, Jackie is treasuring her work camp time and wants to spread the word to churchgoers and college students in Japan who might benefit from similar volunteer experience.

“I hope to grow people's hearts,” she says, “And help



Workcamp members Tomoko Makino and Yoh Kikuchi pose in Japanese “yukata” with limb recipients.

them better understand the world that surrounds them.”

Few places can start that process better than JELA's Artificial Limb Work Camp in Jamkhed.



Jackie hammers aluminum into the shape of a leg.