



Funds from JELA help support the multi-faceted work of the Comprehensive Rural Health Project of Jamkhed, India. CRHP, as the name implies, uses a total approach to addressing the health needs of the poor of Jamkhed. As part of this approach, CRHP runs a model farm where local farmers can learn more efficient methods of productivity. The manager of the farm is 27-year old Ratnamala Chavan. This is her story.

CRHP'S GARLAND OF DIAMONDS



Ratnamala with fellow CRHP worker Jayesh Kambale

In Malarathi, the name “Ratnamala” means “Garland of Diamonds”. See, now, how the diamonds shine.

Yet, at birth she was unwanted.

In India, as in many developing nations, sons are more valued than daughters and Ratnamala’s parents were eager for a boy. When Ratnamala was born, they paced over their rotten luck – for Ratnamala had three older sisters!

Thus, from birth her parents showed her little interest. They had no intention to send her to school.

Yet, Ratnamala liked learning and was befriended by the family of a local teacher. In exchange for cleaning and other household chores, she was fed and given the necessary books and clothing for her education. In time she graduated from high school, not at all common for young women in rural India.

Her father, a day laborer, then married Ratnamala to a man from a poor family. She was soon pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. During her pregnancy, her husband became ill. The diagnosis was AIDS.

Ratnamala traveled to the bustling city of Mumbai for her own examination, where she learned

that she too had HIV, contracted from her husband. When those in Mumbai learned of her illness, they kicked her out of their community, fearing her to be contagious.

She received a similar reception back home. The neighbors wanted nothing more to do with her. Six months later her husband died.

At this point, her in-laws drove her away, saying, “You are nobody now! Get out!”

Carrying her small child, she returned to her parents. Yet, her parents now had the son they had long been seeking, as well as a second boy. Frightened their sons would “catch” AIDS, they too cast Ratnamala from their house. No one would speak to her or even touch her baby.

Alone, with an infant to feed, and now sick herself, Ratnamala hunted for work in vain. Finally, she got a civil construction job digging ditches. Every day she had to leave her baby alone, for no one would care for it. Each chance she got she would rush back for feeding, but her child became weak and sick. One day she hurried home to find her tiny daughter dead.

She stood numb with grief, too numb, she says, to even weep – for even if she did, there was no one to hear her cry. She drank insecticide to kill herself.

Yet, the amount was not enough and she survived. Next, she contemplated leaping down the deep stone well of her village. She stood by the wall but could not yet find the courage to jump. In a few more days, she might.

But it was then that she drew the attention of a Village Health Worker from CRHP. The worker observed the ravaged state of her health and had Ratnamala taken to the CRHP hospital in Jamkhed. When she arrived, she weighed but 62 pounds.



Ratnamala and CRHP founder Dr. Rajanikant Arole

Now she weighs 110 and her face sparkles. As the young and beautiful manager of CRHP's successful model farm, she owns the respect of the entire community. Even her parents are proud of her achievements.

The transformation began in her hospital bed under the care of CRHP Director Dr. Rajinakant Arole. In his years of work in Jamkhed, Dr. Arole had seen many marginalized women like Ratnamala, stigmatized by leprosy, AIDS or spousal abuse. Often he and CRHP have given help to such women so that they may stand on their own feet. In Ratnamala's case, he saw that she was intelligent, a high school graduate and eager to work. When she responded to treatment and her HIV symptoms improved, he offered her a job -- working on the CRHP farm.



ELCA missionary Jackie Bencke and Ratnamala

Once there, her energy and education soon brought her to a leadership position. Now she has 25 workers under her supervision, some of them HIV/AIDS sufferers like herself and others women who have escaped domestic violence. The farm grows organic vegetables and fruits,

and raises chickens, goats and cattle. Ratnamala is financial administrator, but lends her hands to manual labor as well. At times, her symptoms worsen, but she always responds to treatment and refuses to lose her spirit, the smiling example of someone living with AIDS, not dying from it.

Nearly the victim of suicide, she now says, "Even if someone wants to kill me, I will not die. I want to glorify God because He has given me new life."

The love of CRHP workers led Ratnamala to join their witness. On Feb. 18th, 2007, she was baptized. She is outspoken in her faith and tells all that will listen about the power of Jesus Christ in her life.

"I feel I should serve God totally. What has happened to me was designed by Him. I am happy. The life

that I have now is a bonus to me."

See, again, how the diamonds shine.