

Darjeeling thanks good Samaritans

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FEELING: Some people slip into our lives and leave imprints on our hearts and are never ever the same. These lines by American poet Flavia Weedon mirror thoughts of the crowd gathered at Hayden Hall in Darjeeling on Sunday to acknowledge the contribution of two Canadian Jesuit priests who made selling their home more than half a century ago and settled tirelessly to make it their place. Father Edgar Burns and Father Gerald Van Wallenghem have been the pillars of the hill town, especially in education and community development, since their arrival from Canada in the early 1950s.

The North Point College Alumni Association felicitated the duo for their unfathomable contribution in building the hill town.

Fathers served in various capacities at St. Joseph's School and College and St. Robert's High School in Darjeeling and St. Alphonsus High School in Kurseong in various capacities and at present he is actively involved in the alumni association of St. Joseph's School, Darjeeling.

Manish Gupta, former chief secretary of the state government and a St. Joseph's College alumnus, sent a message, mentioning that both the missionaries had remained undaunted by obstacles, including getting their residential area permit. It took years but they stuck to their tasks and persevered. "They have decided to dedicate themselves to alleviating the sufferings of the poor and had no intentions of leaving Darjeeling," wrote Gupta.



■ Father Burns and Father Van at Hayden Hall in Darjeeling on Sunday.

Community Development and Social Welfare Centre in 1969 and till served as its director till 2006, adding a whole new dimension to community service.

"Never has so much been done by a man for so many of the poor in Darjeeling. Burns started Hayden Hall so that the students and alumni of St. Joseph's could gain experience in social work," said Noreen Dunn, an educationist. Even Mother Teresa had written to Burns, thanking him for "all your help to our Sisters".

"My first meeting with Father Van was when I was in middle school. He was then this handsome young Canadian Father (he is still the same). He has since touched the lives of thousands like me. The maples of Canada have definitely touched the land of the two leaves and a bud," said Manuel Coutinho, an educationist in his early 70s.

Amid the offerings of khadas (traditional scarves), garlands, Van reminisced his voyage to India and he was caught in a storm in the Atlantic for three days.

"Those days, we were not allowed to return home. However, the rules changed later and when I returned to Canada for the first time in 1967, someone told me that I should stay back at home. Which home? I asked. My only home is Darjeeling. This place has kept us going. Thousands of people have entered our lives and touched us. It has been a fantastic journey."

Darjeeling, 12 Oct, 2009

TRIBUTE TO FATHER BURNS AND FATHER VAN AT HAYDEN HALL, DARJEELING

A large gathering at Hayden Hall Institute came together to honour two Canadian Jesuit priests, Father Edgar Burns and Father Gerald Van Wallenghem, for their lifelong contribution to education and community development in Darjeeling.

The felicitation programme was organized by the North Point College Alumni Association in recognition of the remarkable service rendered by the two priests since their arrival in India from Canada during the early 1950s.

Father Edgar Burns served in several educational institutions including St. Joseph's School, St. Joseph's College, St. Robert's High School, and St. Alphonsus High School. He founded Hayden Hall Community Development and Social Welfare Centre in 1969 and served as its director until 2006, dedicating his life to the welfare of poor and marginalized communities.

Educationist Noreen Dunn praised Father Burns for his extraordinary commitment to social service, stating that Hayden Hall was established to encourage students and alumni of St. Joseph's to engage in community work. It was also noted that Mother Teresa had once written to Father Burns expressing gratitude for his support to her congregation.

Speaking during the programme, Father Gerald Van Wallenghem fondly recalled his journey to India and described Darjeeling as his true home. He shared that despite opportunities to return permanently to Canada, he chose to remain in Darjeeling and continue serving the people of the hills.

Father Gerald joined the Society of Jesus in 1944 and arrived in India in 1950. Over the years, he served as an educator, preacher, counsellor, and community leader. He was instrumental in reviving the Darjeeling and Dooars Medical Association and also founded St. Joseph's School.

Former Chief Secretary and St. Joseph's alumnus Manish Gupta, in a message sent for the occasion, acknowledged the unwavering dedication of both missionaries, highlighting their perseverance in serving the poor and their lifelong commitment to Darjeeling despite numerous challenges.