

Darjeeling thanks good Samaritans

iva Banerjee
www.banerjeeindian.com

FEELING: Some people enter 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 to acknowledge the contribution of two Canadian Jesuit priests who made Darjeeling their home more than half a century ago and laboured tirelessly to make it their place. Father Edgar Burns and Father Gerald Van der Vliet have been the backbone of the hill town, especially in education and community development, since their arrival from Canada in the early 1950s.

North Point College alumni Association felicitated the duo for their unfatigable contribution in building the hill town.

Fathers served in various capacities at St. Joseph's College and St. Robert's High School in Darjeeling and St. Alphonsus School in Kurseong. Regional general secretary of North Bengal, he led the Hayden Hall



Gerald joined the Society of Jesus on September 7, 1944, and arrived in India six years later, executing deftly the roles of an educationist, preacher and councillor. Gerald was instrumental in reviving the Darjeeling and Donors Medical Association as its chairman from 2002 to 2006. Father Van also founded the St. Joseph's School in Kurseong. He has been associated with the St. Joseph's School and College as well as 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 alumni, 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.

SUDAN KUNDU/NTV

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, 14 Aug, 2006

REV. FATHER E.P. BURNS – A LIFE DEDICATED TO SERVICE AND HUMANITY

Presented by Trinika Subba

Gamma Publication, Paradise Market, H.D. Lama Road, Darjeeling

For many visitors, Darjeeling is known for the beauty of Mount Kanchenjunga, winding hill roads, charming hillside homes, the toy train, and its refreshing climate. However, for the local people, Darjeeling is equally remembered through its institutions and service centres that shape everyday life – and among them, Hayden Hall Institute holds a special place.

The name of Father Edgar Peter Burns naturally remains inseparable from Hayden Hall. In many ways, Father Burns and Hayden Hall became complementary to one another, symbolizing dedication to humanity, education, and social service.

Father Burns was born on 26 April 1925 in Montreal, Canada, to Claudius Burns and Nora Burns. Raised in a compassionate and service-oriented family, he developed strong religious values from an early age and joined the Society of Jesus in 1943 at the age of 19. Inspired by faith, human values, and service to society, he dedicated his life to uplifting the poor and marginalized.

He arrived in Darjeeling in 1951 and began his educational service at St. Robert's School in 1952. Later, he served at St. Alphonsus School, where he not only educated students but also extended care and medical assistance to underprivileged communities around Kurseong. He was also actively involved in teaching theology and philosophy at St. Mary's College.

In 1960, Father Burns returned to Darjeeling as a professor of English Language and Literature at St. Joseph's College. During his long tenure of nearly 25 years, he guided students not only academically but also inspired them toward meaningful and socially responsible lives.

While achieving recognition in the field of education, Father Burns never neglected his social responsibilities. In 1969, through his personal initiative and commitment, he established Hayden Hall Community Development and Social Welfare Centre, which gradually evolved into one of Darjeeling's most respected social institutions.

Under his guidance, Hayden Hall became actively involved in adult education, night college programmes, rural healthcare outreach, medical assistance in remote villages, community dispensaries, mother and child welfare services, scholarships for poor students, tuition support, tailoring and weaving training, and various self-employment initiatives.

Father Burns also played an important humanitarian role during times of crisis. Following the devastating fire incident on H.D. Lama Road in 1971, he helped secure land and rehabilitation support for affected families in Singamari, further strengthening his bond with the people of Darjeeling.

His lifelong dedication to education, healthcare, social welfare, and human dignity continues to inspire generations. Through Hayden Hall and his countless humanitarian efforts, Father Burns became not only a respected priest and educator but also a symbol of compassion and service for the people of Darjeeling.
