

“MY DEAR FRIEND...”

Volunteer group “Friends Without Borders” hope pen pals will help break down barriers between India and Pakistan.

BY MARK B. JACOBS
PHOTOS FROM FRIENDS WITHOUT BORDERS

“Wouldn't it be cool if I arrived in Pakistan carrying an armload of friendship letters from kids in India!” This was the idea that stuck John Silphant shortly before he had to make a brief trip out of India in order to renew his expiring visa.

John never made that journey—an illness kept him in India for several more months. But when he recovered, he and some friends decided that the idea of Indian and Pakistani children exchanging letters of friendship was too compelling to be ignored. Thus began the widely acclaimed, if somewhat unorthodox, project they called “Friends Without Borders”.

“When a child sits down to write a heartfelt letter to an unknown friend, internal bridges are formed,” said John. “When these letters are received by kids across the border, they bring with them new information: they came from kids who care.” The FWB team believes that these simple expressions of warmth and empathy could help this generation find harmony in a way that has evaded the generations of their parents and grandparents.

“We are simply providing a means for kids to communicate, heart-to-heart, a way for them to discover how much they share in common, a way for them to express the feelings of friendship and camaraderie which come naturally to them,” explains team member Maria Durana.

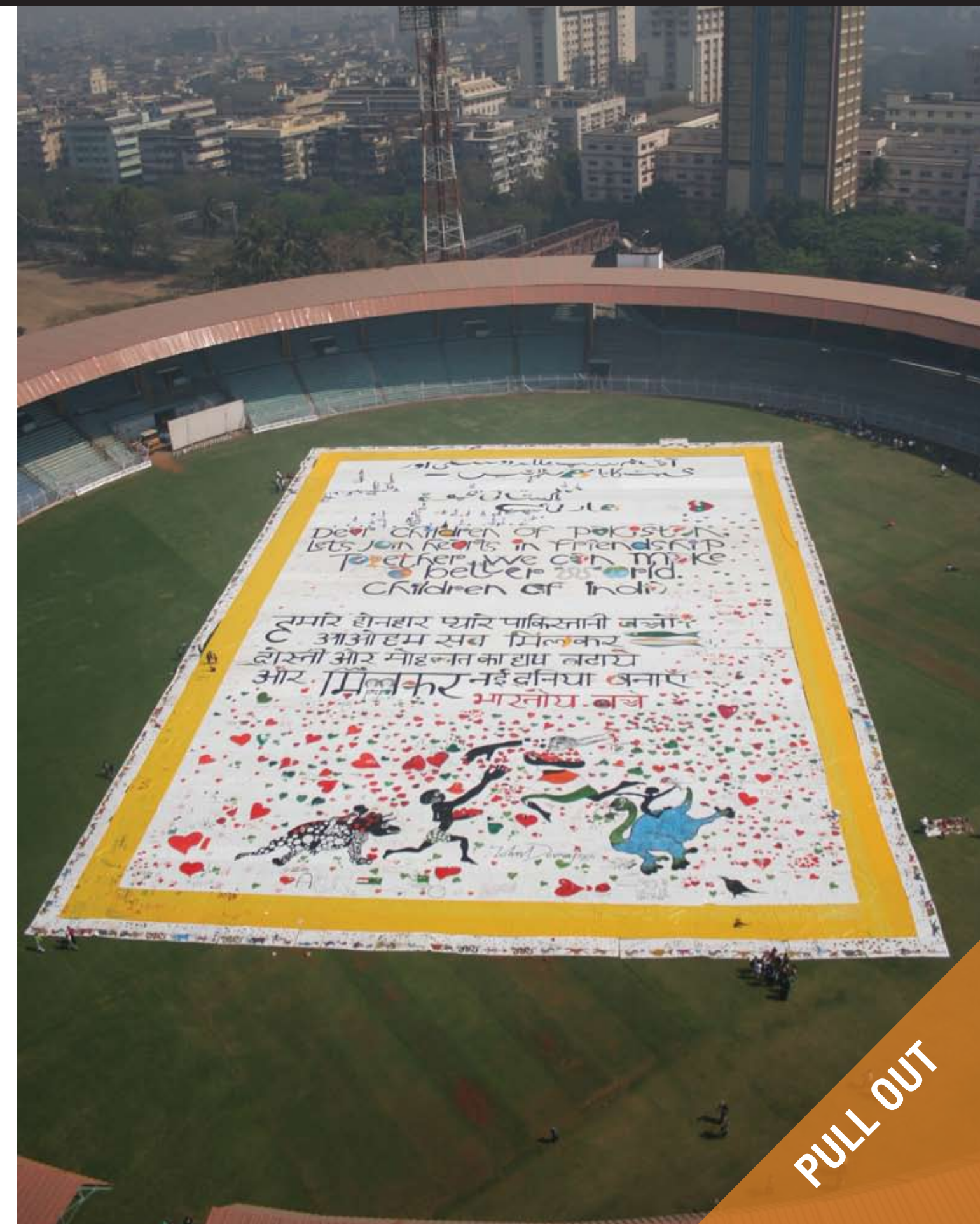
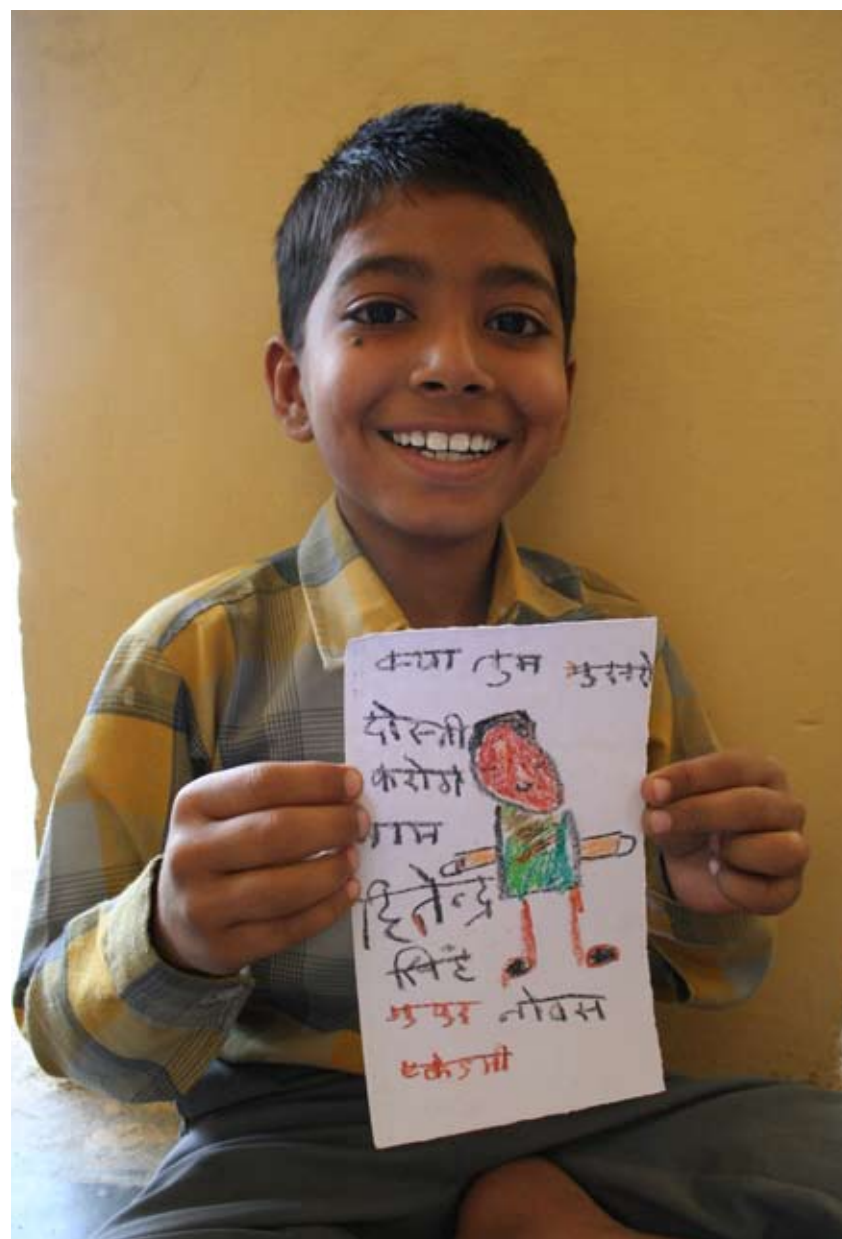
The challenge for the FWB team was not selling the idea—it received tremendous enthusiasm in both India and Pakistan—it was getting the project to the children spread throughout two vast countries. “It would be great if we could ride bicycles from school-to-school to introduce this idea to every child from the southern tip of India to the Khyber Pass,” said Maria, “but that wasn't a practical solution for our tiny, all-volunteer team. So we decided we had to figure out a way for the media to do our work for us.”

The device they came up with was an enormous letter—the world's largest, according to the Limca Book of World Records—measuring 120m by 80m, and covered in artwork, from the children of India to the children of Pakistan. The letter toured through famous international cricket stadiums in Bangalore and Mumbai and major historical sites like the Gandhi Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad and Amritsar's infamous Jallianwala Bagh, attracting media coverage every step of the way. Ultimately, in April of this year, it was delivered to a crowd of 8,000 Pakistani kids in Lahore's Gaddafi Cricket Stadium. In a spectacular reply, the children of Pakistan sang a specially written song of friendship for the kids in India.

“Creating the World's Largest Love Letter was attention grabbing, but it was also in-line with the spirit of our programme,” commented FWB programme coordinator Yoo-Mi Lee. “And it was a lot of fun! It helped us to get attention for the project very quickly across both countries.”

As the FWB team travelled across India, they stopped in schools to present the programme and collect friendship letters. “The school visits are still the soul of the programme—and the most rewarding aspect,” said John. “The kids light up when asked if they would like to have a pen friend from across the border. Their enthusiasm tells me that this simple exercise could produce a magical transformation in the region when this generation grows up.”

Anyone interested in learning more about the project, or how they can help, can click on www.friendswithoutborders.org.



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