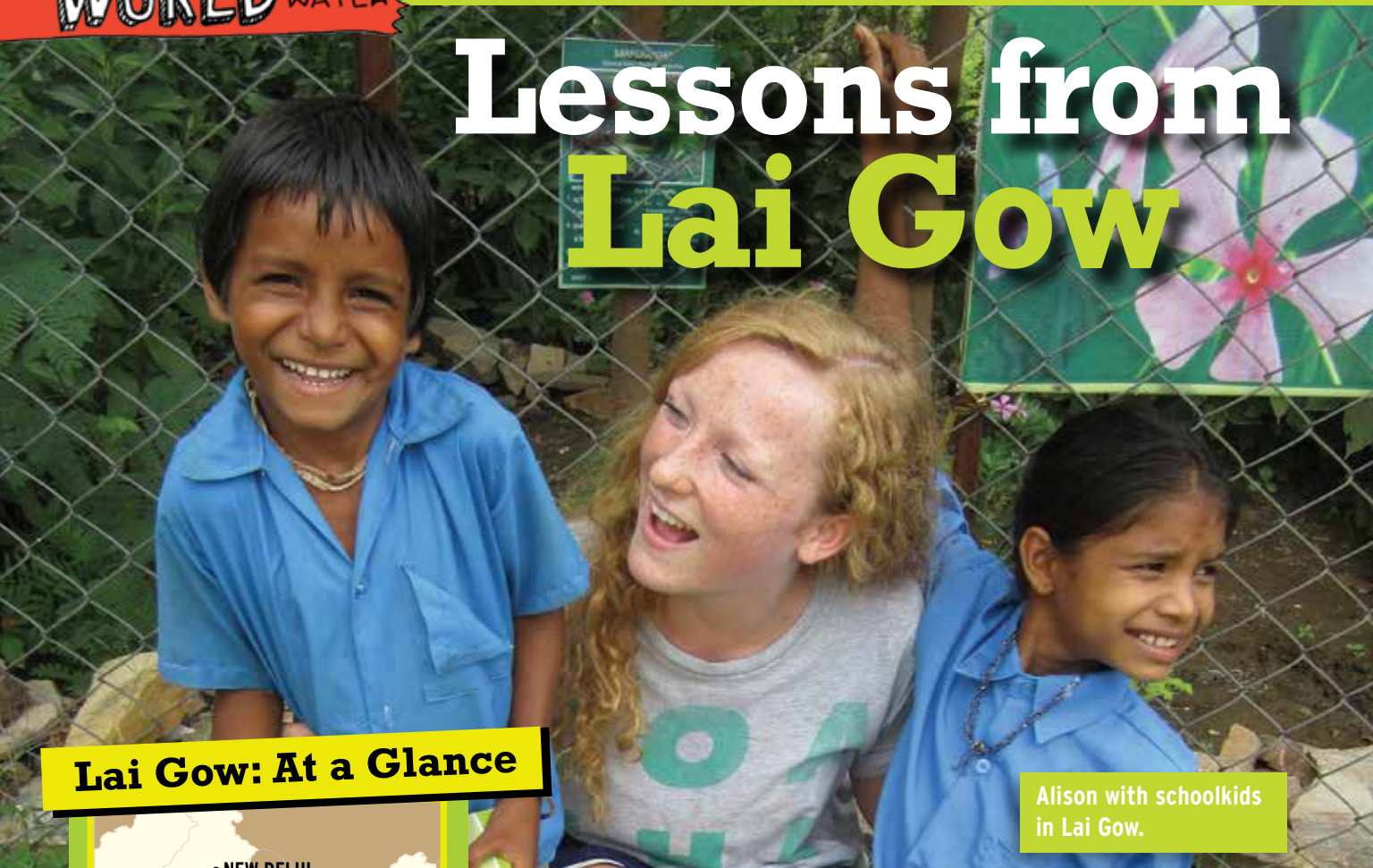


Lessons from Lai Gow



Lai Gow: At a Glance



LOCATION: India

POPULATION: Approximately 700 people in Lai Gow, of which 250 are children

CHALLENGES: Lai Gow is located in a desert region of India. It typically does not receive much rain, even during monsoon season. This leads to a lack of water for people, animals, and crops. There are few economic opportunities in Lai Gow, so often families must leave the area to find work. Boys are given more educational opportunities than girls are. There is a lack of teachers and schools, so educating kids is a challenge.

Alison with schoolkids in Lai Gow.

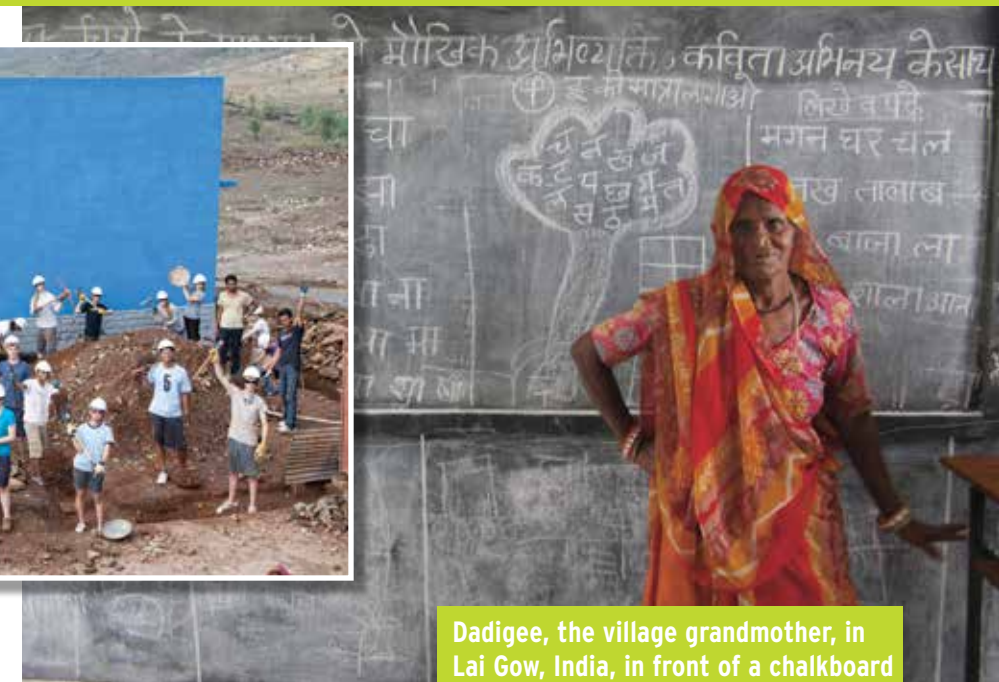
Alison Ross travelled to Lai Gow, India, on a Me to We trip to a Free The Children community when she was 18 years old. This life-changing journey opened her eyes to the world. In her own words, Alison shares her experience.

The Spark of Change

It all started when I was in Grade 6 and my teacher told us the story of Iqbal Masih, a freed child labourer from Pakistan who was killed for speaking out against the horrors of child labour. I remember being shocked that such a story could be true, and that slavery still existed. Our teacher then went on to tell us the story of another young boy, Craig Kielburger, who, upon learning Iqbal's story, decided to start the organization Free The Children and go on a six-week trip through South Asia. Iqbal's story sparked my passion for social justice issues, and Craig's story inspired me to go to India one day. While it took me until halfway through Grade 10 to convince my parents to let me go, my trip to Lai Gow, India, was finally booked, and my dreams were becoming a reality.



Alison and the Me to We group helping build a school.



Dadigee, the village grandmother, in Lai Gow, India, in front of a chalkboard at her community's school.

The Work

While we were in Lai Gow, we spent most of our time building a new school. Our job was to dig the foundation for a future classroom. We used pickaxes and shovels to dig and clear the trench. The ground was very rocky, and it was always super hot. It was definitely hard work, but seeing the trench get deeper and wider every day really made it worthwhile. The best part of it all, though, was when the kids had recess, and we got to take a break from digging and play games and interact with them.

Memories of a Lifetime

It's been almost a year since I was in Lai Gow, but I can still remember everything about it. There are countless moments from my trip that I think about all the time. One of them took place when I first arrived. I had absolutely no idea what to expect, and just

when I was starting to think that maybe we had taken a wrong turn and gone too far into the countryside, our driver slammed on the brakes and a sunlit blue school suddenly came into view on top of a hill. With each step we took up the hill to the Lai Gow school, the roar of the excited kids grew louder. When we arrived at the top, we were greeted by all of the schoolkids, lined up and wearing blue uniforms, their tiny faces glowing excitedly. As I walked through the school gate, the village priest marked me with a *tika* (a red line drawn in the middle of the forehead, similar to a bindi). Then a child grabbed my hand, motioned for me to sit, placed a beautiful flowered lei over my head, and sat down beside me. The beauty of the people of Lai in this

moment is something that I often revisit. The biggest thing my trip changed in me is how I look at the world. I see things very differently now. For example, two years ago, I may have seen a glass of water and just tossed it out if I wasn't thirsty. Now I look at a glass of water and instead I see a 12-year-old girl named Sunita, who, before Free The Children started working in her community, had to walk 10 km (6 mi.) carrying 35 L (10 gal.) of water on her head just to provide clean water to her family. I realize how lucky I am to have that water, and I don't waste it. I can now truly recognize how big a luxury things like tap water and a fridge full of food really are, and I feel grateful to have these luxuries.

To find out more about Me to We trips, go to www.metowe.com.

Photos: Me to We