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Finding a miracle

Caroline Boudreaux discovers her life's meaning in India

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Finding life's purpose

Westbank resident creates a foundation for miracles



Chris Monheim (left) and Caroline Boudreaux meet Manas (center) for the first time in Cuttack. The women bear the markings of wisdom and fertility on their foreheads and throats.

By CATHERINE HOSMAN
Staff Writer

When Caroline Boudreaux quit her lucrative media sales job in January 2000 to travel around the world with her friend and co-worker, Chris Monheim, she wasn't expecting a life-altering experience. Her goal was simply adventure, a respite from the daily grind of day-to-day life.

The journey, however, would lead her to Cuttack, a small town in eastern India, and the Servants of India Society Orphanage. The experience would change her life forever and inspire her to form The Miracle Foundation – an organization that helps sponsor some of India's forgotten children.

Like many other villages and cities across India, Cuttack suffers from an epidemic of unwanted pregnancies.

"Many pregnant, unmarried women in India run away from home and have their babies on the street," Boudreaux says. "The young women abandon their children. The lucky

ones end up at the Cuttack orphanage, while others are left to die under bushes."

Because the women do not sign a relinquishment form enabling their child to be placed for adoption, the orphanage becomes financially responsible until the child is 17 years old.

Through The Miracle Foundation, young, pregnant women will be housed in a dormitory, given the proper medical care, bear their children in a clean environment and, hopefully, sign their children over for adoption.

The organization offers the opportunity to sponsor an or-

phan who is not adoptable for only \$45 per month per child.

"This gives an orphan hope for a good future," Boudreaux says, citing benefits such as nutritious food, shelter, clothing and school supplies.

Alan Graham, president of Mobile Loaves and Fishes, Inc. and board member of The Miracle Foundation, says when you look into Caroline's eyes "you see a big heart there."

"Caroline is someone who has the skills to raise the money they need," Graham says.

"A person can profoundly change the life of a human being. That's the miracle – taking a little to do a lot. That's



Above, Caroline Boudreaux photographs the children of Cuttack. Left, Boudreaux watches with joy as the children of the Servants of India Orphanage taste ice cream for the first time.

what The Miracle Foundation is all about."

A turning point

Boudreaux was still in her 20s and seemed to have it all – youth, beauty, education and success. She had a great boyfriend, a new house and a new car. Between her six-figure salary and wise investments in the stock market, she set herself up to be independent early in life. But something was missing.

"I thought, when I have money, I'll be happy," she says. "When I have a boyfriend, I'll be happy. If I have a house. . . if I have more money. . . but I was pretty unhappy."

When Boudreaux decided to quit her job to travel around the world with Monheim, the trip was meant as a new adventure into Third World countries.

"We were both very well-traveled, having toured Europe extensively," Boudreaux says. "Now we wanted to see the Third World."

Cambodia, Vietnam and Penang, South Africa, as well as Egypt, Israel and Nepal topped Boudreaux's 'to visit' list. Monheim added India because she wanted to find Manas, a young boy she had been sponsoring through the Children's Christian Fund.

"Despite the letters and pictures she received, she wanted to see if he really existed and if he had been getting her support over the years," Boudreaux says.

The women met at Monheim's house and laid out a world map on the floor. Taking turns, they dove their fingers onto the map to choose their destination countries.

Their trip was planned around the seasons so they could "chase summer."

"Everywhere we went, it would be summer," Boudreaux says.

From the beaches of Hawaii and the summits of Nepal to the pyramids of Egypt and the coral reefs of Australia, the women immersed themselves in cultures unseen by most Americans.

One of the most frightening things they did was to stay in a township in South Africa that still suffered from the legacy of apartheid. However, it was their journey to India that would change their hearts forever.

Finding Manas, and a miracle

Thousands of tiny tin-roofed shacks line the streets of Bombay, India. The midday temperature is a sweltering 119 degrees. The homes become ovens to the residents trying to escape the heat. With dwellings so close to the streets, exhaust fumes from the cars, trucks and busses navigating the city drift into open doors and windows, making the living environment toxic. The air is heavy and thick with the smell of cow dung. Because cows are considered sacred, they are not killed for food and are allowed to roam freely in the city.

Boudreaux and Monheim see life in its extreme in one of the world's most over-populated urban settings from behind the protective window of a taxi.

"Some people were defecating (on the street), some were bathing, some were sleeping," Boudreaux says. "Some were carrying bricks on their head, some were carrying books and some were crying."

Lepers walk among the crowds and run to the taxi each time it stops, begging for money.

"There were kids with no hands, kids with no noses," Boudreaux says, her voice trailing off. "By the time we got to our hotel, we were in silence."

Their first thought was to end their trip and start on the next leg of their journey around the world. But then they remembered their reasons for traveling to India – to find Manas to see if he was really receiving Monheim's aid.

The next day, the women boarded a plane for Cuttack. Upon their arrival, they were greeted at the airport by two English-speaking social workers from The Christian Children's Fund. One of the men was the interpreter who had been translating Monheim's letters to Manas all those years.

"This guy's name was on every letter she ever received from the little boy, and now

"I am the proud owner of everything money can't buy. I have peace. I have joy. I am fulfilled."

— Caroline Boudreaux

she was meeting the man who was translating," Boudreaux says.

After a long drive over bumpy roads in a small car that made the sultry day seem even hotter, the two women found themselves stepping back in time to an ancient culture.

"Everyone in the village was waiting for us," Boudreaux recalls.

Trilling women greeted the visitors, while villagers threw rice and flowers at them. The matriarch of the village painted markings of wisdom and fertility on their heads and throats.

Surrounded by hundreds of villagers, the women were paraded through the streets.

"They walked behind us,

clanging symbols and drums," Boudreaux says.

"The people lived in houses that were made of mud," she continues. "They lived in nature. It smelled like dirt."

When they finally reached an opening in the village, Manas was there waiting.

"It was him, it was really him," says Monheim. "I recognized him from pictures."

In a gesture of ancient hospitality, Manas' mother washed the feet of the women. Children wanting to take a blessing from the women bent down to touch their feet.

"It was overwhelming," Boudreaux says. "Especially if you don't know what is happening."

Manas' mud home was the size of a small office. Boudreaux had to bend her 5-foot-9-inch frame to enter the four-foot high doorway. There were no beds. Children slept on the ground while adults slept sitting up.

"Their village was hit badly by a cyclone last year, and Manas' mud hut was destroyed," Monheim says. "Their entire family (four children, two parents and a grandmother) all lived in this 6-by-6-foot mud and stick house."



Caroline Boudreaux met Pinki, her CCF child. Standing behind them are Pinki's parents.

Monheim inquired how she and Boudreaux could help Manas the most.

"They needed a house," Monheim says.

For \$700, and help from Manas' village, the family was able to begin construction on a larger home.

A personal turning point

On May 14, 2000, Mother's Day in the United States, the women were invited to the home of Damodar Sahoo, director of CCF. More than 100 orphans rushed to meet the women, touching their feet to take blessings. During a one-hour assembly, the group paid homage to Buddha, Allah, Jesus and Krishna through prayer and song. Soon, Boudreaux and Monheim were lost in a sea of children, picking them up, hugging them, playing with them. Boudreaux's turning point came when she met Sheebani Das, a baby girl who was found abandoned in bushes when she was only a few days old.

"Sheebani Das came over and put her head on my knee," Boudreaux says, her eyes filling with tears of remembrance. "When I picked her up she pressed her little body into mine."

When Boudreaux began to sing lullabies to Sheebani, the

relaxed child relieved herself on Boudreaux.

"I went to put her in her bed," she says. "It was one of 30 wooden beds, like picnic tables. When I placed her on that bed, I heard her little bones clack against it. That was my turning point. I knew I would never be the same. I had seen too much, done too much."

Two days later, Boudreaux was in Nepal. Except for the guides and other trekkers, she was alone trekking through the Himalayas without Monheim.

"You really do feel closer to God in Nepal," she says, recalling the promise she made to do whatever God asked her to do. "I knew I had to help the children in Orissa the second I put them on their bed. God sent me there."

Boudreaux was back in Orissa less than two years later. Through hard work and skillful fund-raising, she raised enough money through The Miracle Foundation to build enough wells to supply Orissa and the orphanage with water for 100 years. The orphanage now has a garden, from which they can harvest vegetables to trade for eggs and milk. In May 2003, Boudreaux returned to Orissa and was amazed to see the water that now flows through the

Making a difference

The Miracle Foundation, a nonprofit organization, offers several opportunities to help the children of the Servants of India Society Orphanage in Cuttack.

The Ensure Program — A donation of \$200 ensures that an unmarried, expectant woman will have a place to live at the orphanage while they are pregnant. They will receive free medical care, a job at the orphanage and an opportunity to sign the relinquishment form needed for a child to be legally adopted. When the child is born, it will receive pre-natal care and nutritious food.

Sponsor a child — Sponsor an orphan who is not available for adoption and give them the sense of belonging that only a family can give. For \$45 a month, an orphan will receive nutritious food, shelter, education, books, clothing, supplies, toys and the hope for a good future. Sponsors will receive their child's background information and letters from children.

Adopt a child — Children of all ages are available for adoption now.

Visit www.themiracle-foundation.com for detailed information on any of the Foundation's programs.

town. "Water is now readily available to everyone," she says. "Townsppeople and villagers come to the orphanage and gather around the water vats to drink their fill. Residents can also take water home with them."

Currently, The Miracle Foundation only has enough money for five beds for pregnant women, but 25 children have been sponsored since last May.

"Money goes to the whole orphanage," she says. "Now all the children are being educated — not just the boys."

Boudreaux will return to Orissa this March with a group of sponsors. They will endure many of the same challenges first met by Boudreaux and Monheim, and they will reap the rewards of seeing their sponsored children for the first time.

"I am the proud owner of everything money can't buy," Boudreaux says. "I have peace. I have joy. I am fulfilled."



Caroline Boudreaux (center) enjoyed a camel ride in Israel with her sisters Claire Bateman (right) and Anne Pancol.