

LIFE & ARTS

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MICHAEL BARNES

OUT & ABOUT

Change began on Austinite's trip to Indian orphanage

Unlike St. Paul, **Caroline Boudreaux's** conversion came not on a road, but in the dormitory of an Indian orphanage.

In May 2000, the backpacking Austinite landed in Mumbai, India. It was hot, 110 degrees.

"A horrible time to visit India," says the former TV advertising representative, who had quit a lucrative job with the local Fox channel to travel the world.

While in India, her traveling companion, **Christine Monheim-Poyner**, wanted to look up a child she had sponsored. The Americans encountered multiple obstacles contacting the boy, **Manus**, in part because of language problems (the subcontinent is home to hundreds). Eventually they discovered he was in the state of Orissa, on the opposite coast of India.

When they discovered it would take \$750 each to reach Orissa, Monheim-Poyner suggested: "Let's just send the money to him."

"No way," Boudreaux, now 40, remembers saying. "You dragged me here, and we are meeting this child."

When they arrived at Manus' village, the women received the "National Geographic welcome." Men lined the streets; women took them among the mud huts. Drums played. A woman washed their feet and dried them with her dress.

Then there was Manus.

"There he was, this little boy," Boudreaux says. "He took us into his mud hut, which was surprisingly cool. There were two rooms for six people, no bathroom or kitchen. We thought we had met the poorest people in the world. We were wrong."

The Americans lingered in Orissa, doing volunteer work, making rope swings, reading English to the children, playing with them. On May 14, 2000 — Mother's Day — Boudreaux called her mom back in the States, then attended dinner at the home of the Christian Children's Fund's director.

The Americans were not prepared for what they found there.

"There were 110 bald, filthy, empty-looking orphan children," she says. "They ate rice. We were given chicken."

They sat through their children's Hindu prayers. A girl, **Sheebani**, put her head on Boudreaux's knee. "They are so desperate for affection, they push their bodies into you," she says.

The girl fell asleep in her arms and urinated. Boudreaux went to put her to bed.

"The place smelled like hell," she says of the dormitory without a trace of comforts.

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Michael Barnes writes about Austin's social scene at austin360.com/outandabout.

BARNES: Austinite acts on drive to help orphans

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"As I set her down, I heard her bones hitting the wood of the bed. I thought, 'This just isn't right.' I had to do something."

The dormitory shock continued to bother her. "I just couldn't get right," she says. She sought out an Internet cafe and wrote down the experience: "It was cathartic. And I was able to capture the moment while it was fresh in my mind."

Once out of shock, her first impulse was to purchase mattresses for every child in the orphanage. She and Monheim-Poyner e-mailed all their friends for donations. When they brought the offer to the orphanage's director, he said, though mattresses were nice: "We don't even have clean water."

"This was my first introduction to real need," Boudreaux says.

It would lead to the creation of her Austin-based Miracle Foundation, which now operates four orphanages in India, two in Orissa and two in Jharkhand.

Some elements of Boudreaux's upbringing foreshadowed this conversion from the business sphere to charity. She was raised a devout Catholic among six brothers and sisters in Lake Charles, La. Her mother was a social worker, her father a pharmacist, working the family store, Boudreaux's New Drug Store. She attended Catholic schools, then studied at Louisiana Tech University before transferring to Louisiana State University-Shreveport with a degree in psychology. Her aim: to become a therapist.

After applying to graduate school at the University of Texas, she moved to Austin in 1992. Then came the unexpected rejection letter. "I was devastated," she says.



Jim Innes

Caroline Boudreaux first began helping children in India with donations and adoption work; her organization now provides homes.

Other options awaited the cool brunette with crystal eyes. The self-described "quintessential Cajun girl" and "big hugger" radiates attentive calm and, at the same time, seems coiled for action. That served her well during nine years as a sales representative, as she built long-term relationships and picked up professional polish, business skills and crucial contacts among CEOs and entrepreneurs.

In business, she learned: "The harder you work, the more money you make. I outworked them. I put in some hours there," she says, but ultimately: "Money isn't satisfying."

She turned into a scrupulous saver, though, so she set off with Monheim-Poyner to visit Hawaii, South Africa, Egypt, Israel, India, Nepal, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia. After the convulsion of India, she separated from her companion to hike and meditate in Nepal.

Boudreaux couldn't stop thinking about Sheebani and the other Orissa orphans: "I was going to do something if it was the last thing I ever did. If I didn't help them, nobody would."

The Miracle Foundation, created as soon she returned to Austin, was first aimed at international adoptions. "I spent 2000-2003 working in that area before realizing it is sometimes corrupt and it is the children that don't get adopted that need us most," she says.

Out of money and patience after three years, she consulted with Alan Graham, founder of Mobile Loaves & Fishes.

"Graham said, 'Who do you think we help?' I said the homeless. He said no, 'Mobile Loaves & Fishes enables 9,000 people to give. Everybody wins. Your job is to be the bridge between the people who want to make a difference and the people who need a difference. Let the spiritually starving feed the nutritionally starving.'"

Soon after that, Boudreaux discussed her plight in a prayer group of Catholic women. One of the women handed her a check for \$10,000, on the condition she didn't send it to India. It was for her to regroup. That helped reconfigure the foundation's goals around managing orphanages, and then to raise \$75,000 at its first donor event.

To live in Austin without savings, Boudreaux paid herself \$35,000 a year. "It's a far cry from the corporate world," she laughed.

Besides the orphanages — one on the coast that opened after the 2004 tsunami has turned independent — Miracle Foundation recently opened its first children's home: one house mother and 10 children.

The amazing thing to many potential donors: It costs only \$100 a month to sponsor a child for a year. (Smaller donations are accepted, too.)

"And we have an ambassador program that enables people to come to India to see our work firsthand," Boudreaux says. "This is what I would love any Austinite to do with me."

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Lisa Dirks

Sooch Village is one of four homes for children in India run by the Miracle Foundation. Caroline Boudreaux, center, started the organization after leaving a lucrative career in ad sales.