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The Oregonian

Her risk-taking brings loving touch to babies

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Today, Portlander Laura Peterson will be traveling somewhere between Hong Kong and Bangkok.

She began her grueling plane ride Tuesday afternoon, expecting at least two eight- to 10-hour layovers. Sometime Friday, she'll arrive in Kottayam, one of India's more progressive towns, known for its vast network of rivers and canals.

The investment is worth it, she says, since it means fewer orphaned babies in India will die from neglect.

"I guess I just wanted to find a way where I can make the biggest difference," says Peterson, who calls herself "a businesswoman trapped inside the body of a humanitarian."

This journey is Peterson's way of building a gate at the edge of a cliff. She's been at the bottom of that bluff, with her heart and arms wide open, for the 10 years she has worked with young children in Oregon's foster care system.

Eventually, Peterson became overwhelmed by the emotional brokenness of these cute-as-a-button beings who would likely never give love, experience compassion or develop a guilty conscience.

So in October 2004, Peterson quit her well-paid job and started making her way to the top of that cliff. "I am either exceedingly brilliant or radically stupid," she often says.

Her partnership with Journeys of the Heart, a Hillsboro-based international adoption agency, directed Peterson's pilgrimage to India. In 2006, her nonprofit, Hands to Hearts International, offered 21 trainings for more than 280 women influencing the care of 1,470 orphans.

The curriculum, developed by a Utah State University researcher, teaches caregivers infant massage and the importance of calling children by their first name. The women are also encouraged to cuddle crying babies instead of carrying them like they're blocks of wood.

"Did the trainings do any good?" Peterson says she asked the various orphanages in a follow-up evaluation. "The first thing they said is: 'Yes, we haven't had a baby die since your training.'"

Peterson pauses to let the impact sink in: Neglect is preventable. Hope is possible. Babies are salvageable.

Last month, Hands to Hearts received a huge challenge: Raise \$50,000 by June 30, and a California foundation would match it. Peterson had two months to solicit more money than she had raised in two years. She mentioned that on her Web site, www.handstohearts.org, and folks responded.

Now, Peterson is being invited to bring Hands to Hearts to other countries, such as China, Kenya and Russia. She is finalizing a contract with the government of India to begin a pilot program. And she says the prince of Cameroon wants the training in his West African country.

"My life has been changed," says Peterson, a single woman with no children. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done, and there's been some real challenges. I didn't know if it was going to make it."

What sustains her social entrepreneurial project is that it is low-cost and hires impoverished women from India to train other caregivers.

"It's inspiring to see a person like Laura wake up and say, 'I want to make a difference,' " says board member Todd Lofgren, who moved to Portland a year ago after spending his career on international projects for the U.S. government and Peace Corps. "But she also did her homework."

Peterson still has to work other jobs to afford health insurance. But, she says, she's richer in spirit, happier at the top of the cliff than she's ever been at the bottom.

"You just never know how much you're capable of," she says, "and how much goodness is out there."

That's how life's miracles seem to work: When the weight you carry is love, the climb up is easier and a lot less lonely than it looks.

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