

Dalai Lama honors local founder of nonprofit



Orphanage workers attend a "Mommy" training in Jagipathur, Odisha, India. Photo by Briana Forgle

KC COWAN

When Laura Peterson created a nonprofit organization to nurture young children, she never imagined she would be honored by the Dalai Lama. But that is exactly what happened when the founder of Hands to Hearts International was recognized as one of 51 "unsung

heroes" from across the world.

Peterson, a Pearl resident since 2006, spent most of her career working with troubled children. She ran a wilderness program for teens with drug and alcohol issues, and worked with foster children and violent children in psychiatric wards.

"There was a common denominator with the kids who

were the most damaged, and the ones that, regardless of what we did, it seemed all the king's horses and all the king's men were never going to put this little one back together again, and the common denominator was Attachment Disorder," she said.

Attachment Disorder occurs when a child never has the sense of being loved and cared

Pearl woman starts Hands to Hearts International, which trains orphanage workers, expanding their capacity to nurture infants and young children.

For it's more than just affection, Peterson said. It literally affects how the brain grows. Peterson said if babies do not get that eye contact or are not held and nurtured early on, they cannot learn to relate to other people, and this leads to emotional issues later.

"What parents do impacts the actual brain architecture that is or isn't built and can affect their entire future," she said.

The most typical scenario causing AD is an orphanage where there are so many babies that the caregivers can only manage to feed and clean the infants. Difficult family situations can also result in AD, and in America, Peterson was seeing the resulting crises on a daily basis.

"I was working at the bottom of the cliff where you have all these broken kids, all battered and broken, and it's very excit-

ing, very dramatic," said Peterson. "But I kept looking up at the top of the cliff and thinking we should have a fence up there! Kids should stop falling off this cliff."

So she quit her job in 2004 and founded Hands to Hearts International to teach the most cost-effective way of reversing the problem. At first she worked out of her condo, then renting a small office in Montgomery Park four years ago. The initial project was at an orphanage in India. Peterson picked that area because of the extreme need.

"Research showed that at the time there were 84 million-plus orphans in Asia alone. And 12 percent of those were under the age of 5."

Peterson soon learned that in India caregivers in orphanages are in the lowest social rank. They were not thought of as being important. The training changed that. ▶

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The Dalai Lama congratulates Hands to Hearts International founder Laura Peterson. Photo by Briana Forgle

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"Because you only get trained if you're important," said Peterson. "And so no one had ever trained them, and certainly not an international NGO. So it was a big, big deal. We had women travel for 400 kilometers to attend this training."

"And they learn the most simple things, like, you're the most valuable one for your own child and now for these in the orphanage. So we're teaching them little things they can do every day that can make a huge

difference. So some of it is making eye contact, holding and snuggling and just rocking the baby."

Some of the instruction dealt with health concerns, too. For example, caregivers never had washed their hands between changing babies' diapers, or before feeding the babies.

The training was wildly popular and effective, but then the orphanage Peterson's team worked at was shut down. Finances crumbled and she was afraid she'd have to close permanently. Still, she had

one woman in India who knew the training and there was just enough money to send her out and try to spread the knowledge.

On her next visit to India, Peterson discovered that where the training had taken place, infant mortality had dropped dramatically. Orphanage directors said the babies responded to their names, and the caregivers took real pride in their jobs.

Peterson got grants and donations to expand in India and add programs in Ugan-

da, where they trained 450 "Mommy and Daddy Leaders."

"Those 450 Mommy and Daddy Leaders live in 200 villages and they're a lifelong resource. Because once they're trained, those people hold it for the community for the rest of the time."

With a budget of about \$200,000, Peterson knows there is so much more need than she can handle at this point. She has been invited to go many places, but chooses to go only where her trainer can work with a group that can exponentially take the techniques and apply it on a large scale.

And like the proverbial pebble that is tossed into a pond, that is what is happening. The circles just keep spreading. As of December 2013, Hands to Hearts International has led 1,607 trainings for 41,751 women and men, benefiting 144,311 children under the age of 5.

Many organizations had investigated Hands to Hearts International's work and been impressed by the results. That was immensely satisfying to Peterson, but nothing compared to being recognized by the Dalai Lama. A donor to her pro-

gram nominated her.

The ceremony was held Feb. 23 in San Francisco, and each nominee received the Tibetan traditional white scarf, called a kata. They also were presented with a red "protection and blessing cord," which was personally blessed by the Dalai Lama. All the recipients got to meet the religious leader, too.

"It's really, really humbling," said Peterson. "We're a very small office and we work kind of under the radar. Our results are incredible, but not many people know about us, so it was huge validation and honor."

Peterson intends to turn the recognition into financial support to expand the program. She especially hopes to find a volunteer who can work on marketing and publicity.

Find out more about Hands to Hearts International at handstohearts.org. ■



Laura Peterson and George Apatachioae at the awards banquet in San Francisco. Photo by Briana Forgle