



The Hands of Vrindavan

Katie Walter B.A. '09, a first-generation college graduate, seeks positive change in India by starting a women's artisan collective.

by Claire Sykes

Vrindavan lies on the banks of northern India's Yamuna River, not far from the Taj Mahal. Considered the childhood home of Lord Krishna, an important Hindu deity, Vrindavan is one of India's most sacred pilgrimage sites. It's depicted in Hindu mythology as lush and verdant, its holy river fresh and clear. Today, a few isolated parts of the city are still beautiful, but the poverty can be overwhelming. The once clear Yamuna River is choked with fertilizer runoff, industrial effluents, and raw sewage. Overdevelopment and deforestation, air and noise pollution, and monkey menace (from urban spread) add to the troubles for its most vulnerable residents: widows and their children.

Known as the City of Widows, Vrindavan has a total population of 57,000, nearly a quarter of which are destitute women who have been widowed or abandoned. They pour into the town, either in observance of centuries-old religious and societal prescriptions or because their families, unwilling or unable to support them, have left them here.

Just outside the main city, on the road that leads to Mathura, Krishna's birthplace, Babita and her 12-year-old son, Lav, live in a tiny concrete room with no bathroom or kitchen, no running water or electricity. They pilfer electricity from a power line and walk to a nearby temple to pump water. Babita's husband left them years ago and never returned.

Babita had always hoped for a better life—and recently, she found it in Vrindavan ka Gaurav, or "Glory of Vrindavan," a collective of women who make traditional hand embroidery, formed by Katie Walter B.A. '09. Says 33-year-old Babita through an interpreter, "Before, my son and I were struggling just to have food to eat, and I was unable to pay for his education. Now, I am able to pay for his school and we can afford to eat food that is good and nutritious."



Walter traveled to India for the first time in 2007, as a participant in Lewis & Clark's overseas study program. "Ever since my first visit, I knew I wanted to return and help," says Walter. Over the last two years, she has been helping impoverished Vrindavan women increase their incomes and become more economically independent. She has also been working to bring greater awareness to the environmental problems faced by the world's second most populated country.

South Asia is a long way to go for someone who grew up in blue-collar rural Ohio, seven miles from Bowling Green and a half hour from Toledo. As a teenager, Walter liked to listen to the music of sitarist Ravi Shankar and the Beatles. She grew interested in India and tracked down books on Eastern philosophy and culture.

Walter wanted to go to college, a first for her family, but was discouraged by her mother (an assistant manager at the local grocery store) and her stepfather (a forklift operator there), who argued for the working class and against the financial burden of student loans. Walter had many interests and no clear career goal, but she knew she wanted to live a different kind of life. She decided to move away after high school.

With her wanderlust, love of music, and strong work ethic, she ran record stores in Toledo, Phoenix, and Charlotte, North Carolina. She also studied yoga and completed yoga teacher training at an ashram near Charlottesville, Virginia, called Yogaville. When she helped a friend move to Portland, she ended up staying and soon fell in love with a man who urged her to follow her dreams to college. That was all she needed to hear.

"It had been 12 years since I'd been in school and my grades were not exemplary," says Walter, who chose Lewis & Clark because of its emphasis on helping students become global citizens. After proving her academic acumen at Portland Community



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level,” says Walter. “I also became more aware of Vrindavan’s environmental problems and how much they are at odds with the mythological view of the place.”

Later, she volunteered at Food for Life Vrindavan, a social service NGO with a charity school. She visited some of the students and their families and wrote up profiles about them for potential supporters. “I felt so sad when I saw their living conditions,” says Walter. “The average home is 10 feet by 10 feet with a little double-burner gas stove and no furniture except a metal trunk for storing clothes, which also serves as a bed.”

From their homes, many Vrindavan women make small traditional embroidered costumes called *poshak*, for Krishna deity statues, which shopkeepers collect and sell in the bazaars as souvenirs—at a 500 percent markup. “The women are grossly underpaid, due to their lack of refined skill and interaction with the market,” says Walter.

Many Vrindavan women have been widowed and dumped by their families or are ill and in debt, living with alcoholic husbands, or struggling as the sole provider. Seeing their lives hit Walter hard. “I felt that there was an extreme injustice being done here, that almost every possible barrier was against these women being able to socially and economically survive, much less progress.”

She had to do something. Back in Portland, the day before her senior year at Lewis & Clark began, she started writing grant proposals. For her Glory of Vrindavan project, she received a \$10,000 grant from philanthropist Kathryn Wasserman Davis’ 100 Projects for Peace initiative, as well as an additional \$2,500 from Lewis & Clark. Then she won a Fulbright Research Grant for her India-based environmental project, “Between Religion and Economics: Establishing Ecological Development Discourse in Vrindavan.” The project started in January of this year and will run through October. A Critical Language Enhancement Award, a Fulbright add-on, gave her four and a half months to learn Hindi in India before she started her research.

In May 2009, a week after she graduated, Walter took off to spend two months in India. She returned two months later and has been there ever since, except for a two-week break back to the States this spring. First she stayed in Delhi volunteering at Dastkar, an NGO that helps to improve the economic status of traditional-craft artisans. Then she traveled by bus about 100 miles to Vrindavan, set herself up in a 16th-century women-only ashram, and started the artisans collective, in partnership with Food for Life

College, Walter landed on the dean’s list during her first year at Lewis & Clark. “I was attracted to international journalism because of my broad interest in the world and human stories,” says Walter. “I ended up majoring in international affairs. It gave me a focus with room to grow into other areas.”

It also awakened her then-dormant passion for India. During fall semester 2007, she and 19 other Lewis & Clark students lived in Delhi, Benares, and Bangalore, studying the culture and visiting nongovernmental organizations. “I’d read about Vrindavan beforehand and wanted to go there on that first trip,” says Walter. “I was interested in the city’s culture and religious mythology—as well as its ties to nature—in the face of its many environmental challenges.” But she would have to wait almost a year to make it to Vrindavan.

Meanwhile, back in Portland, she volunteered with the Association for India’s Development, reviewing funding proposals and organizing charity events. She also explored opportunities with NGOs in India. In August 2008, her then-boyfriend funded her second trip to India. After 20 hours in the air, 2 hours on a train, and a half hour in an auto rickshaw, she reached Vrindavan.

She served as a public relations intern at Friends of Vrindavan, an organization dedicated to preserving the city’s sacred forests and ecology. “That experience gave me a greater knowledge of how the different layers of government work at the city

Vrindavan. The organization already had an on-site sewing center, with about six women making school uniforms. From the families Walter had visited before, she gathered several more women; their numbers soon grew to 12, all working in the same room.

To Walter, it’s the women’s positive attitude that stands out the most. As Babita says, “We are blessed to live here in the land of Krishna and Radha [Krishna’s consort]. Our life is very simple and there is always struggle. Nevertheless, we find ways to be happy.”

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At the collective the women are upgrading their skills, learning the intricate and ornate embroidery usually done by men for deity statues in the big temples. Colorful cotton threads tell the mythological stories of the town in vines and creepers, peacock feathers and flowers. Their work appears on covers for meditation cushions, bags and straps for yoga mats, and reusable shopping bags. The collective’s most recent designs, based on a local paper-stencil craft called *sanjhi*, adorn kitchen linens, some of the collective’s newest products. Baby items are coming. Walter welcomes new product ideas and designs from the women, which “gives them a sense of pride and ownership in the project.”

So does taking the products to market at the bazaars in Delhi twice a year, an outing the women look forward to. “It teaches them about competitive pricing and product quality,” says Walter. So far (since July 2009), most of the products have been sold from the collective’s website (www.vkgposhak.com), with steady (and growing) orders from Yogaville, its biggest customer. The website’s photos and bios of artisans let people know what their lives are like and inspire dialogue. The site invites customers to send photos of themselves when they make purchases.

In September 2009, participants in Lewis & Clark’s overseas study program to India got to meet Walter and some of the women from the artisan collective. Says George Austin, leader of the fall program and an adjunct faculty member in the communication department, “For Katie to come back to India after her first trip in 2007 and do the work she’s doing was really inspiring for the students. She’s a role model for them.” Sunil Kumar, professor of history at the University of Delhi and a coordinator for Lewis & Clark’s overseas study program, adds, “Katie is a paradigm of what transcultural education is all about. She stands as a wonderful example of how far curiosity, enterprise, and intelligent planning can take you.”

While overseeing the Glory of Vrindavan, Walter has also been serving as a liaison between NGOs and the city’s stakeholders. She’s working with the Yamuna Vrindavan Heritage Foundation to help clean up the river, and with the Braj-Vrindavan Heritage Alliance to help preserve their ancient temples and statues and to list the city as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Heritage Alliance and Friends of Vrindavan, with Walter’s help, are also trying to save some of Vrindavan’s few remaining, threatened indigenous groves.

This summer, as part of her Fulbright, she conducted a baseline survey—in four languages, using the latest-model iPad—with nearly 1,000 Vrindavan residents. “My study looks at how effective it is for environmental initiatives to use the Hindu mythological conception of the town as a means of advocating environmental stewardship.” Her long-term goal is to compare the environmental attitudes in the city to those elsewhere in India. She’ll give the results to Indian NGOs, governmental institutions, and international organizations wanting to improve India’s natural and built heritage.

Meanwhile, the artisan collective is running pretty much on its own, its budget paying the women a living wage with reserves for eye exams, health concerns, and unexpected hardships. “It’s good to see the ladies all working as a team, everyone training one another,” says Walter, who will continue as its head of sales “from wherever I may be.”

When she returns to Portland this fall, she’ll work with the Association for India’s Development and study for the Graduate Record Examination. She’s looking into graduate school for fall 2011, in South Asian studies at the University of Washington or the University of Michigan, and in the regional development program at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. She’s also considering serving as an assistant leader for a Lewis & Clark overseas study program, and/or working on environmental issues with the Vrindavan Institute for Vaisnava Culture and Studies, a Krishna-focused Hindu organization.

“The people of Vrindavan are fortunate to have Katie contributing to their community,” says Dell Smith, professor emeritus of health and physical education and the leader of the 2007 overseas study program to India. “Her strong intellectual curiosity, combined with a desire for human justice, motivates her to be an active player in making things right.”

Says Walter, “Life is too tough here for many to spare a thought to anyone outside of their immediate families. But when foreigners offer practical service rather than exploit them or give quick pocket change, it makes a big impression on the people here. They feel safe enough to open their hearts and minds.”

For someone who once wondered whether she’d ever go to college and couldn’t decide what to do with her life, Walter has found a place where she not only thrives, but also makes a positive difference for others. “My focus is no smaller or larger than India itself,” she says. “I’m fascinated with all of it.” ■

Claire Sykes is a freelance writer in Portland. She loves the meditation cushion cover with the peacock feathers that she bought from Katie when the two of them met this spring—and she thinks of the women of Vrindavan.