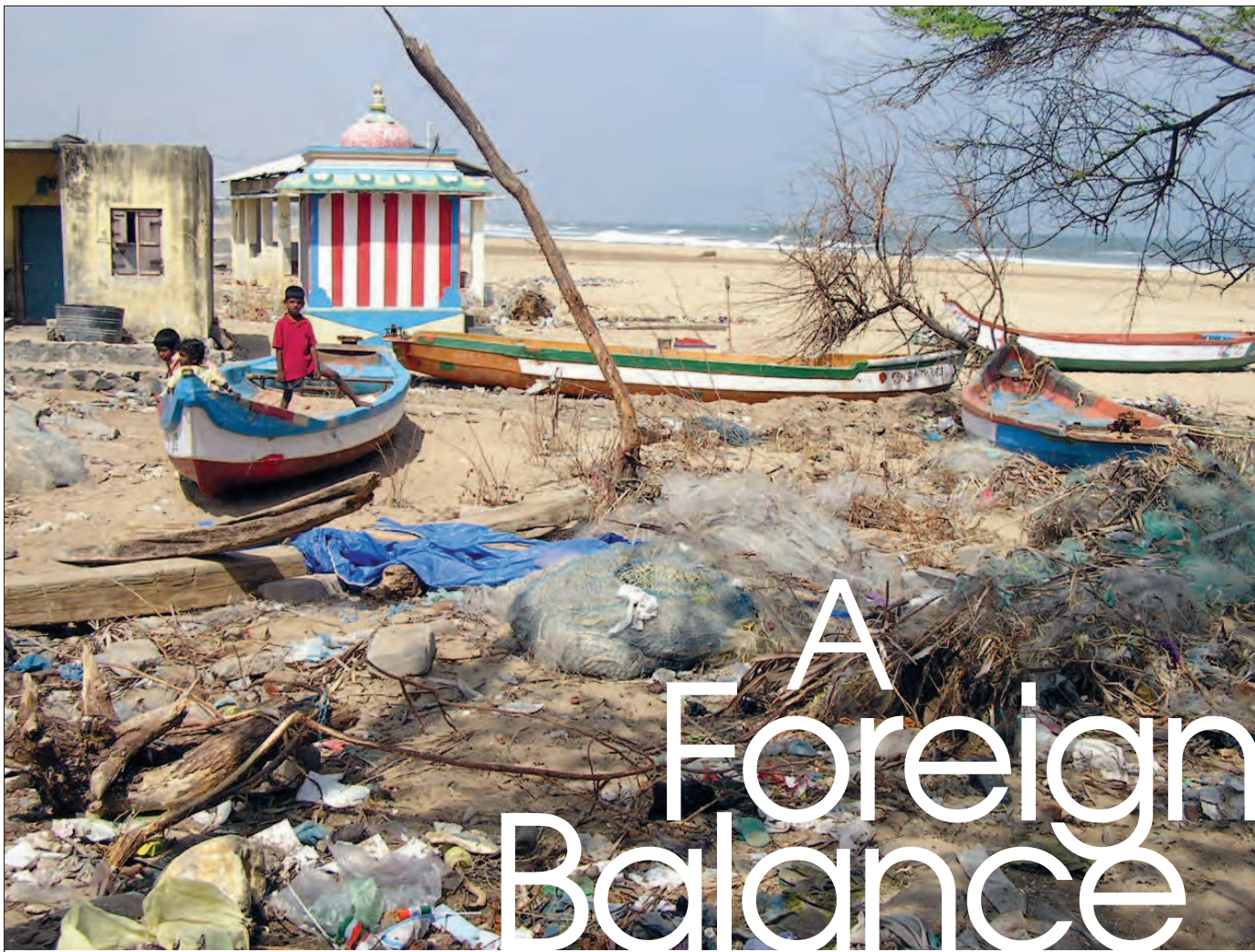




A Foreign Balance

Corvallis woman travels to India to help with tsunami relief. BY KIM SMITH

Judi Kloper arrived in India Jan. 8, just three weeks after the tsunami destroyed the southeastern coastline. Once-familiar sights were washed away. The disheveled land was littered with makeshift tents of eclectic colors, creating a new village where concrete homes and humble huts had once stood. Other huts made of wood and straw were now piles of debris layering the dusty ground.

Kloper regularly visits India for her work in international adoption, and the January trip was already planned. But once the tsunami hit, her plans changed. This time she was part of something much big-

JUDI KLOPER HELPS DISTRIBUTE RICE TO TSUNAMI VICTIMS IN INDIA.



ger — the international effort to help out. “I knew I couldn’t go empty-handed,” she said. So she sent out an e-mail to hundreds of people, threw together a last minute fund-raiser at Evergreen Indian Restaurant and raised \$5,674.

She partnered with Care and Share, a non-religious organization that runs orphanages and schools for more than 300 children in India. Together they used the money to help people in small villages along the southeast coastline in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. “I was apprehensive about what I might see,” she said. “I was scared because I knew that I would be sad if I saw things that I was used to seeing that were no longer there.”

The first few days were shocking, even though she’d read the stories. The coastline had been cut and chiseled, as if something had violently torn away the beautiful flat shoreline. People wore empty expressions tinged with fear and desperation, not knowing what to do next. “I saw a lot of people just sitting around,” Kloper said. “What can they do?”

Some combed the shoreline, pulling bloated bodies from the wet sand. Others wandered in search of food, left only with the remaining roots from below the surface of the stripped soil. Many of their wells were destroyed and the rest were contaminated with salt water.

Kloper arrived with clothing and medicine. The money she raised in Corvallis helped feed 1,000 people for three days, build

10 new boats, buy 14 new fishing nets, repair 1,000 huts, desalinate and clean 25 wells and provide 25 kg of rice, utensils and household articles for 1,000 families.



The people of Peddapattanam, the first village that Kloper visited, are fishing people. The men venture out to the ocean every day in their dilapidated boats and patched nets to bring in their food, their income and their livelihood.

The sea had betrayed them. Their boats were tossed miles in from the coastline, smashed to pieces and hanging in trees. The fishing nets were tangled masses that carried bits of their village. Women hovered anxiously over nets, their aged hands picking and mending in hopes of restoring their lives. They needed a way to pick up the pieces; they needed the resources to repair their once-lively village.

When Kloper and the other volunteers arrived, the people ran to them, greeting

them by touching their palms and showering them with bright garlands of jasmine. “When you give, it’s an altruistic thing,” Kloper said. “It makes you feel good inside.”

Kloper remembers her trip in other people’s words — everyone had a tsunami story. There was the young woman, orphaned for 15 years, who was about to be married. The tsunami washed away her dowry. Her brother had saved for five years for the dowry because before he could marry, tradition dictated she had to be married.

Care and Share replaced the dowry and the arranged marriage took place the next day. “I kept thinking that life is going on in the midst of all these things,” Kloper said. “With all that these people were going through, there was still the joy of a wedding.”

The story of a young boy with cerebral palsy touched Kloper more than the rest — she has a personal connection to kids with disabilities. Kloper’s adopted son Dana, from India, is quadriplegic with severe cerebral palsy and bilateral hearing loss. But because Kloper adopted him, Dana got the medical care he needed, attended public school and is now an OSU student.

Kloper arranged for the young boy with cerebral palsy in India to get treatment. Doctors agreed to construct braces for his legs and build new furniture that would make his life less difficult and more comfortable. Kloper worked with his parents and taught them how to care for their child. “I felt like my son would be happy to know that we were able to touch someone’s life in that way,” she said.

Though India is thousands of miles away, part of Kloper is still soaking in the pungent smells of its streets and the heat of the Indian sun. But she is here too, with a blinking computer screen, a ringing phone and piles of paperwork for her recent adoptions. Kloper and her husband have five children, three of whom are adopted from India. She’ll soon be back to help out again.

“I must have lived there at some point,” she said, referring to the concept of reincarnation. “There is a connection for me and I am very comfortable when I am there. I am always at home there, even in the strangest places.”

To donate to the tsunami relief fund, please contact Judi Kloper at judiKO@aol.com ★