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## Meet An Inspiring Woman: Becky Douglas

By Mickey Goodman - Posted February 24, 2011 4:38 AM

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Still in shock following the tragic suicide of her daughter in 2000, Becky Douglas was sorting through Amber's dorm room when she came across repeated donations to an orphanage in India. "Something in me clicked," she says. "I had to find out why she was supporting a charity on the other side of the world."

What the concert violinist and mother of 10 found in India changed her life forever, as well as the lives of tens of thousands with leprosy (Hansen's Disease).

"I was so naïve I didn't even realize leprosy was still a problem in the world and was initially repelled by the hundreds of street beggars," Douglas confesses. "But when I made eye contact with a woman, I realized she was a

mother just like me."

After her return to suburban Atlanta, she had recurring nightmares about the children who begged beside their parents. Over lunch at her kitchen table, Douglas and three friends launched Rising Star Outreach (RSO), totally undaunted by their lack of experience in fund raising or running a non-profit, particularly one in a foreign country. The goal: to educate the children so that their parents would be the last generation forced to beg on the streets for subsistence.

Eight years later, the RSO complex sits on 13.5 acres in Thottanaval near city of Chengelpet in southern India. It houses 180 students in two Marriott Children's Homes, an elementary school, a volunteer dormitory and a cafeteria. The Peery Matriculation High School opened in 2010, just in time to welcome RSO's rising ninth graders. It is the first high school in the history of India for the children of the leprosy affected who now have an opportunity to learn skills to move into India's booming economy.

Volunteers, the lifeblood of RSO, come from all over the world at their own expense. Students, executives, medical personnel and retirees work side by side to construct fences, dig latrines and wells, counsel micro-loan recipients, dress wounds, and tutor children.

Major contributors include the J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation and the Peery Foundation. American Idol runner-up, David Archuleta and his legion of fans have also gotten involved, raising funds to purchase school furniture, dental equipment and an eco-friendly sewage system.

Understanding that to help the children she must also help the parents, Douglas, who now lives in Manhattan, teamed up with Padma Venkataraman. The activist and daughter of India's former president, Ramaswamy Venkataraman, had begun facilitating micro-loans in the leprosy colonies. They adopted Venkataraman's philosophy that "anything given away is worthless to the recipient" and charge interest on the miniscule loans.

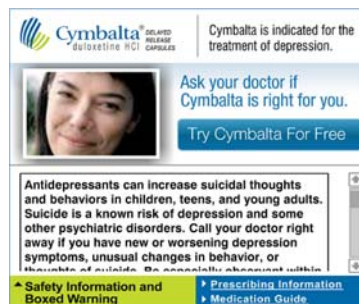
To launch the micro-lending program, Douglas and Venkataraman focused on the women who were more accepting of change. One in each colony is responsible for collecting the loans in tiny increments, plus interest. Until all loans are repaid, no one is eligible to receive another. Seeing their success, their husbands also launched micro-businesses.

Since many doctors and medical facilities still refuse to treat the leprosy affected, Douglas raised funds for mobile medical units. Leprosy patients are charged two rupees (about four cents) for treatment. "When it was free, no one followed the doctor's advice," Douglas says. "Now they follow it to the letter."

Douglas is well on her way to achieving her dream. Not only has RSO educated hundreds of children from the colonies, it has granted 4,000 micro-loans. With an average of five people in each family, the impact is enormous. She is a testament that one woman can make an impact on a seemingly impossible problem.

Did you know:

- Every two minutes one person in the world is diagnosed with leprosy -- Leprosy Mission, Canada.
- Leprosy is still found in nearly every country. If detected early, the disease is entirely curable with



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About the author: Mickey Goodman is an award-winning journalist based in Georgia.

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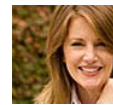
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