

From Capital Hill to the Himalaya

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EDITOR

Before Caroline Orr can open the pathway gate to her home, Tashi shoves her little black nose under the gate letting Orr know that she has a visitor.

“Her name comes from the Tibetan greeting, *Tashi delek*,” says the silver-haired woman whose hair is youthfully tied back in a smooth ponytail. Her little dog, a silky Himalayan breed, has been named appropriately. Tashi greets with big eyes and friendly attitude.

Orr and Tashi live in a one-bedroom suite adjacent to Orr’s daughter Suki, and Suki’s family. Orr likes the simplicity of her home, having become accustomed to living a simple life after spending months teaching at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in northern India. She’s had her arthritic hands cramp up from the cold of the unheated monastery after nights curled up in a sleeping bag. She’s gone without hot showers until she was advised by a medical practitioner to move out to where she could warm up her joints and have a warm shower. It’s clear that Carolyn Orr, or “Momo” as the monks call her, is not your typical grandmother.

For starters, the Scottish-born woman gave birth to Suki in Bangkok and has lived in Australia, Hong Kong, the U.S., different parts of Canada, and Vietnam during the Vietnam War. It’s hard to focus on Orr’s work in Tibet once these morsels of information have spilled out into the conversation.

“It’s not something I talk about,” says Orr, but it’s too late. The cat is out of the bag, and there is a whole pot of tea to tide us over as she backtracks on a fascinating life. It’s a story that will tuck back to her work in a monastery. Orr says that when she was living in Scotland, she had a map of the British Empire.

“I looked at it and decided I wanted to go all over the map,” says Orr. She describes how, inspired by the map, she set out by boat from Scotland to Australia. After some exploring in Australia, she continued onto the other side of the world. Orr stopped in San Francisco where she met the man she would marry.

“This was during the Vietnam draft,” she says. He went to Stanford and Harvard and was selected to work for the Agency for International Development and the Hudson Institute in New York, a policy research organization. He was sent to Vietnam as the advance man, and Orr went with him. She doesn’t like talking about “that dark era.” The Hudson Institute advised against counter-insurgency in Vietnam, but once it had begun, Orr was there, to learn firsthand about some of the unfolding atrocities in the war. Orr wasn’t hidden safely away. Her own life was in jeopardy as a jeep was blown up on the road in front of her, and the car she was in ended up with more than a dozen bullet holes in the side. She saw what was going on in the field, and behind the scenes. Orr was in many ways, a fly on the wall of an era, seeing and hearing things that never went into the history books. “That was also when Martin Luther King was shot,” she adds sadly.

When Orr became pregnant, she went to nearby Thailand to give birth to her daughter. After the baby was born, the young family moved to Washington. Orr’s husband was one of 18 intellectuals brought to Capital Hill as a thought-leader. Lyndon B. Johnson was in power, and her husband worked under Johnson.



Caroline Orr enjoys a moment with two young monks. photo supplied



Caroline Orr stands among the monks at a monastery in Bir, India where she taught English and is working to solve problems with eyesight and hearing. photo supplied

“We went to all the Whitehouse functions,” says Orr. “Then Nixon came in.” Even though her husband’s one-year term was only half-way done, the change in leadership forced him out to Alaska to work for the Secretary of the Interior. “There was such paranoia in the Whitehouse. Everything was bugged. If we wanted to talk we had to go out to our car.”

From Alaska, the family moved to Fernie, B.C. “I had a three-year-old and there was 14 feet of snow, but it was OK.” Her husband spent much of his time in New York on business, and ultimately the couple parted ways. Orr moved back to the U.S., to the seaside city of Carmel with Suki, and eventually came to Canada, finding her way, as adventurers do, to Bowen Island.

With a grown-up daughter, Orr decided to pursue her old love of travel and, specifically, a longing to travel to Tibet. “I’ve always felt a pull to Tibet,” she says. In Tibet, however, she was faced with the harsh realities of the Tibetans living under Chinese rule. The soft-spoken, articulate woman who studies spiritual philosophy is very upset by what she has seen happening to Tibetans. She talks about the destruction of the people, the place, the land and water problems, and the destruction of the Tibetan culture with compassion and grief.

“The Tibetans were the happiest people I ever met. In spite of the atrocities.” She continues, “India is an unsung hero here. They gave land to the Tibetans, and allowed the refugees in.” What has been happening in Tibet is no secret to the world, and Orr finds the international disinterest disturbing. On top of everything else, “127 monks have self-immolated and nobody cares.”

After her first visit to Tibet, she knew she would want to do something to help. Orr found a remote town in Northern India that is home to Tibetan Refugees. Her plan was to help out with refugee children in a town called Bir. “I was planning to help 12 kids under the age of three,” but plans have a way of changing.

Bir was freezing, and with no heating in the schools, the schools were closed. Monks asked Orr instead to teach in a monastery. “I ended up with 32 kids aged four to 17, teaching English and math.” She’d never taught before but adapted quickly to the unexpected situation. “Within one week they were calling me ‘Momo,’ which means grandma.”

Orr took on a full 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. work load every day for three months without pay. While Orr was there teaching, she taught English for classes of 15, rotating through groups of monks. “English teachers cost \$100 a month,” she says, and they are hard to find. She helped set up a curriculum so that as teachers rotate through, there is continuity in the lessons. “I felt vital. I have never felt more wanted.”

She says the boys would come get her to include her in their activities and outings. “Momo” nurtured the children who never complained when they were tired or sick. Most of these boys, who were sent out of Tibet by their parents to escape persecution, will never see their parents again. Orr says in spite of being so young and away from their families, the monks appear happy and at peace. “There is never a discipline problem.” She can leave the children in a room, come back 15 minutes later and they are still at their desks focused on their work. The Tibetan children living in India have had to learn the local Indian dialect, as well as

Nepali, with English as a fourth language. “And they are very good at math,” says Orr.

The monks of all ages got up every morning at 5 a.m. for prayers. Their classes ended at 5 p.m., with an afternoon nap at 2 p.m. What Orr noticed more than anything wasn’t that the kids were worn out from their long days, or bored by a lack of places to go and things to do. Instead, “they had a fascination with everything. They weren’t embarrassed to be silly. There was such laughter and fun.” The monks live at the monastery until they are 18. At that age, they are free to leave. But few choose to leave this particular monastery, says Orr.

She reflects that leaving the monks was harder on her than it was for them to see her go. She credits their Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, which helps them to accept that “whatever is happening in the moment is right.” She taps pictures on her iPad and a video pops up of young monks being very animated and seemingly confrontational with each other. She explains that this is a debating team. “They debate philosophy, and have to be able to defend their beliefs,” she explains, adding that this is the only time the monks will argue a point.

Aside from their usually placid personalities, Orr noticed something else about the boys. Orr noticed that no one was wearing glasses. “I found a company in San Francisco who designed glasses for kids, with plastic, flexible, lightweight frames.” The glass frames were designed for children in need in Mexico. The frames were made in Mexico for Augen Optics. Orr rallied support from friends and got enough funds to help the kids living in the monastery in India, to see. She got a local clinic to organize help from doctors in a nearby town to do some eye tests. She then had the custom-made glasses distributed to the children. She finds it amusing that the young monks typically chose bright colored frames instead of basic black. For the future, Orr is looking at technology developed at MIT called an EyeNetra. It attaches to an iPhone and electronically does an eye test. She also wants to get the children’s hearing tested. “A lot of them have had prolonged infections that affected their hearing.” She adds that she doesn’t know how she’ll solve the problem, but she’ll try.

She also has plans for more adventure. “This time I will also go to Ladakh,” she says. Ladakh is in the northern tip of India, an area that is remote, difficult to access, and a combination of mountain and desert. “It will take two days to drive 400 kilometres along the most dangerous road in the world, to get up to 5,500 metres.”

Caroline Orr’s ambitions don’t end with eyesight, hearing and education. Orr also wants to do some fundraising for a clinic where “they don’t even have a table to lie on.”

She describes people having to lie on the floor or sit on a chair while they get their leg stitched.

“There is an X-ray machine but the cartridge is almost out, and it costs 24,000 rupees,” (around \$460) to replace. She plans to do another trip to India in the fall and by then she hopes she will have raised the funds for the clinic, to supply glasses to the kids and have a way to do something for the hearing impaired. Meanwhile, she has her own extended family who wants her company on this Sunday afternoon. And now, the teapot is finally empty.