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# Miracles keep up with prayers for Rising Star

By **BILL OSINSKI**  
The Associated Press  
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Her pocketful of miracles seems to never empty.

About three years ago, Becky Douglas, a Peachtree Corners mother of nine, had just opened her first home in India for children of leprosy-affected families. Then, advancing her crusade meant doing things like smuggling wheelchairs for lepers and scraping patients' sores with a pocketknife.



Jean Shifrin/Special  
**(ENLARGE)**

Becky Douglas greets a youngster while visiting a leprosy colony. She first visited India in 2001, after a daughter's suicide.

Now, her nonprofit agency, Rising Star Outreach, is a significant force in aiding the poorest of the world's poor.

Construction is expected to be completed in June on Rising Star's new complex near Chennai, India, which will include two boarding hostels for a total of about 300 boys and girls and a school that will ultimately enroll about 800.

Rising Star's work is the subject of an hourlong documentary entitled "Breaking The Curse," produced by former CNN senior producer Brian Kosisky and narrated by former CNN anchor Daryn Kagan. It is set to air on WPBA in June and will be made available to PBS affiliate stations nationwide.

Rising Star's efforts have borne fruit in a several ways:

- Artwork by leprosy patients at Rising Star-supported colonies comprised a highly successful exhibit last year at a major gallery in Vienna, Austria, and a similar exhibit will be mounted later this summer in Atlanta.

- It has subsidized more than 3,000 micro-loans (typically ranging from \$25 to \$100 for the purpose of starting small businesses) to about 1,000 residents of more than 40 leprosy colonies, helping former beggars to move toward self-sufficiency.

- It funds a mobile medical clinic for treatment of both the people in the colonies, as well as their children, and another is scheduled to be added this year. A permanent clinic also is being built.

- About \$250,000 was raised after the December 2004 tsunami in Asia, mostly for repairs and replacements of destroyed fishing boats.

To Douglas, none of all this is accidental.

"These are miracles that just keep happening," she said. "Every time our back is against the wall, something happens and the problem is solved. It's just amazing how this has continued to keep growing."


Rising Star's works are primarily aimed at families affected by leprosy, or Hansen's Disease. Although there is a cure for the disease, leprosy patients and their children and grandchildren still frequently live in isolated colonies and are rejected by most of society. Leprosy is not highly contagious, and while the children at Rising Star come from the leprosy colonies, they seldom show signs of the disease. If they do, it can be easily treated in its early stages.

Douglas was moved by these ostracized children's plight, when she first went to India in 2001. That trip was primarily a search for some meaning in her daughter Amber's 1999 suicide — Douglas had learned that Amber had been making contributions to an orphanage in India. But since then, Douglas has worked to expand on her daughter's charitable act.

It was this aspect of the Rising Star story that attracted Kagan to the documentary project.

"I call them 'inside-out' stories," Kagan said. "They're stories that show the world what's possible, when people take bad experiences and turn them into something positive. Becky has transformed her world, and, literally, the world."

After leaving CNN, Kagan started a Web site, [www.Darynkagan.com](http://www.Darynkagan.com), devoted to what she calls "inspirational news." The Rising Star story is a prime example, she said, adding, "It's a story about healing and helping."



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Kagan said she was also inspired by the partnership Douglas formed in 2003 with Padma Venkataraman, a longtime antipoverty activist and the daughter of a former president of India. "There's this wonderful friendship between Becky, a suburban mom, and Padma, from the elite of India," Kagan said.

Venkataraman advised Douglas that the best way to have an impact would be to form her own agency. And so, Rising Star was born, with Douglas at the head and a couple of friends on her board.

"We didn't know anything," Douglas said. "We were just a small group of people who came together and said, 'Let's do something.'"

Douglas has traveled to India four or more times each year since then and has devoted much of the rest of her time to raising money for Rising Star. The agency now has four paid workers, whose salaries are paid with donations from board members. Everyone else is a volunteer, paying his or her own expenses. One hundred percent of all the other donations go to direct aid programs, Douglas said, adding that the agency's annual operating budget is about \$750,000.

The agency now has more volunteers than it can assign to its projects in India.

The headquarters for Rising Star is Douglas' home, where she lives with her husband John and two of their children.

In India, Rising Star's first children's home and boarding school opened in 2004. After an AJC article that year and subsequent publicity elsewhere, the support for Rising Star began rising exponentially.

Debbie Harrison, vice president for government affairs for Marriott Inc., is one of those who've become benefactors of Rising Star.

"I can't think of a more worthwhile organization to be involved with," Harrison said. "Her (Douglas') organization is run so well, no money is wasted and she is saving these children and giving back a life of dignity to their leprosy-affected parents."

Harrison said she became interested in Rising Star after a student at her daughter's school in Washington raised \$90,000 for tsunami aid administered by Rising Star. One of her sons has served as a Rising Star volunteer, and the Marriott Foundation, of which she is a board member, has provided primary funding for Kosisky's documentary.

In "Breaking the Curse," Kosisky said he tried to capture the "profound" ways leprosy-affected people have been transformed by the works of Rising Star.

He recalled a despondent leprosy sufferer who'd attempted suicide by drinking pesticide. But, after receiving a micro-loan to buy a cow, the man sold the cow's milk, saved his money and eventually the single cow became a small herd. The man is now respected by people who once shunned him, Kosisky said.

"These stories tell us that hope is possible even under horrible conditions," Kosisky said. "And if one person can make a difference like that, anything is possible."

The Rising Star art project was started primarily as an exercise in art-as-therapy, when Austrian artist Werner Dornik visited India and coaxed some elderly leprosy patients into taking art classes. Although the patients were hesitant at first, their works progressed from dark-themed to vibrant. Rising Star has helped establish a permanent art school, the Bindu School of Art, at the same leprosy colony.

At the exhibit last November at Vienna's Kunsthalle Gallery, the works were proclaimed artistic successes by the local press. The attention and respect was also transforming for the artists, one of whom told Douglas, "I have almost forgotten I have leprosy."

An Atlanta art expert said he too almost forgot about the afflictions of the artists when he first saw the paintings.

"This work doesn't need the background story to justify it as art," said Mark Karelson, director of the Mason Murer gallery in Midtown Atlanta. However, the art becomes even more impressive when the artists' physical limitations are considered, he added.

Karelson's gallery will host an exhibit in August of works by residents of the leprosy colonies supported by Rising Star.

The centerpiece of the Rising Star projects is the children's school and hostel being built on a 12-acre tract of former orchard land near Chennai. The children of families living in the leprosy colonies come to live and study at the center. They are taught in their native language and they learn English, the second language of much of India. Douglas said the curriculum is comparable to the best public schools.

"We're taking these kids from the lowest areas and putting them into the toughest classes," she said.

Like most of Rising Star's projects, the construction of the school and hostels has been beset by the challenges of Indian bureaucracy and cultural traditions. The work is done mostly by traditional Indian labor methods; for example, women carry loads of bricks to the work site by balancing them on their heads.

At one point when the prospect of getting an important permit appeared bleak, the school's director asked the children to fast and pray. The next day, the bureaucratic blockade suddenly disintegrated. Douglas said she saw it as another Rising Star miracle.

The students and teachers seem to have accepted such things as routine. One school official told her, "God has granted us the license."

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