



Becky Douglas at home near Atlanta

A LEGACY OF LOVE

After her daughter Amber's suicide, Becky Douglas discovered she had been secretly sending money to an orphanage in India. Now Douglas has found a measure of peace by dedicating herself to the same cause

Becky Douglas would be the first to tell you that her children are her life. Their photographs are everywhere in her sprawling home outside Atlanta, and the 53-year-old mother of nine is only too happy to recount stories about each one. Pausing in front of a picture of her 17-year-old, Esther, Douglas tells how she and her husband, John, 53, an attorney, offered a home to the foreign exchange

student after she had moved here, in 2002, from India. Jolanta, 18, and her brother, Thomas, 15, she points out, were Lithuanian orphans whom she'd heard about from a close friend. "I'm a soft touch," says Douglas, a professional violinist. "We have a large home and a large income, and adopting just felt like the right thing to do."

Then she comes across a portrait of Amber, her eldest child, and a hint of

sorrow dims her natural exuberance. "She was such a great kid, so compassionate and alive," Douglas says. "She was a good student and was a youth leader in our Mormon church. Everyone loved to be with her." That, she adds, was before Amber became manic-depressive in her late teens and began suffering from severe mood swings; it was in the grip of a dark, debilitating depression **CONTINUED**

BY CAROLE TOWNSEND

becoming

that she committed suicide, nearly six years ago at 24.

But even in death Amber was an inspiration. While Douglas was sorting through her daughter's belongings, she discovered that Amber had been sending money to an orphanage in India. "I had no idea she'd been doing it," Douglas says, "but I wanted to help, too. It was a way of staying connected to her."

She began raising funds for the home and eventually visited India, where she was so moved by the plight of the poor that in 2002 she launched her own nonprofit group, Rising Star Outreach (RSO), which provides medical care and also builds schools and housing for some of that country's youngest and neediest cases. "Amber always sympathized with the underdog, probably more so because of her illness," says Douglas, whose extended family now includes hundreds of needy Indian children. "Thanks to her, I'm doing good for others. It's been very, very healing."

Douglas describes Amber as a sensitive and emotional child who began behaving irrationally at around 16. She started mutilating herself by cutting her arms and tried repeatedly to kill herself by overdosing on painkillers. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder at 18, Amber was put on medication and enrolled at Utah Valley State Community College, in Orem.

But her mood swings continued, and she was in and out of psychiatric hospitals over the next five years. She had also claimed she was involved in a tumultuous on-again, off-again relationship with a married professor. On February 4, 2000, Douglas received the devastating news that Amber had parked her car in the driveway of the professor's home, blocked the exhaust

pipe and asphyxiated herself.

"Her death was so horrible, I was in complete shock," says Douglas. After realizing that Amber had been sending part of her monthly college expense money to Belmont Children's Home, in Chennai, India, an orphanage for 5- to 18-year-olds, Douglas learned that Amber was told about the place by a friend from college whose mother raised funds for the home. So when the Douglasses held a memorial service for their daughter, they asked friends and family to donate money to the orphanage in lieu of flowers. The \$4,000 they sent so impressed Belmont's board of directors that they invited Douglas to join. She accepted, and in November 2001 flew to India for a two-week visit.

A two-story mud-brick and cement building, Belmont was modest, but

people over for a slide show in the Douglasses' living room, setting their sights on raising \$20,000 that first year. Instead, they raised \$250,000, thanks to individual donors, foundations and schools, one of which pledged \$60,000 to build a new orphanage.

With more than \$1 million in funds, RSO now supports two homes for children who have been abandoned or come from families affected by leprosy. It also helps out 31 leper colonies, supplying clothing and food as well as loans to help the people there buy livestock and farmland and become self-sufficient (for more information, visit www.risingstaroutreach.org).

Last year RSO also began operating a mobile medical clinic for leprosy patients and started construction on a boarding school that will house 750 children from leper colonies. Douglas,

The poverty she encountered in India scared Douglas at first—then fear gave way to compassion

the children there were happy and well cared for. The other orphanages Douglas visited, however, which provided no medical care, education or affection, left her in despair. Even worse was the wrenching poverty she encountered on the streets—beggars, people with leprosy and the lame. "Here I was, this little housewife from Georgia so repulsed by these people and their illness that I couldn't even look at them," she says. "I can admit it now, but I'm not proud of it." But by the end of her trip, fear gave way to compassion.

When Douglas returned to Atlanta, she and three close friends decided to start RSO. They invited dozens of

who is no longer affiliated with Belmont, travels to India as often as five times a year, leaving John to care for their younger children. (In addition to Esther, Jolanta and Thomas, there is Michael, 15; Alex, 18; Chip, 20; Scott, 23; Jay, 26; and Dianna, 28, no longer live at home.)

Douglas is grateful every single day for how her work helps ease the pain of losing Amber. "The worst moments are at night, after the children are in bed and the house is quiet," she says. "But I believe Amber's in a place where there's no more sickness or sadness. I believe she knows what we are accomplishing—and that it makes her happy." 