

Clifford tells of India, of poverty, of hope

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Features Editor

Surrounded by paints and the music of the Indigo Girls, Cary Clifford sits comfortably on the floor of her room in Shore Hall as she begins her story.

She dabs the brush and paints while she speaks, making what appears to be a small, multi-colored sign. All thoughts of the background disappear, however, as her memories of India and Nepal come into focus.

Like many high school graduates, Clifford took a year off after graduation to word and to travel; unlike most, though, she spent four months of that time in Calcutta, India, working with the order of Mother Theresa.

Clifford saved up money for 10 months, and in mid-March of last year, flew from Dulles International Airport into a future that was as unfamiliar and foreign to her as the diverse country to which she was traveling.

Being alone and not knowing what to expect, Clifford admits she was scared, but those initial fears were also quickly dispelled.

"After I got there, I asked myself what I had been so scared for," she said. "I knew everything would be okay because I felt really drawn to what I was doing."

And what Clifford found herself doing, specifically, was working with the dying and destitute of Calcutta. Mother Theresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity (which is also the only growing order in the church), runs 16 houses in Calcutta alone. These houses cover the gamut of human services from medical clinics and orphanages to houses for women, and even a leper colony, which Clifford emphasized, "was one of the nicest places I went."

Her memory of the leper colony was so positive because she had to face people with physical ailments and mutations on a daily basis, but inside the house the patients were well taken care of and even seemed fairly happy.

Clifford said much of their positive attitude was due to the house's being practically self-sufficient. The patients were able to establish a certain amount of economic independence for themselves because they worked looms and sold what they made. Among other projects, the patients wove saris, many of which were bought by the sisters themselves.

Though Clifford's main chores involved feeding and bathing the patients, and though none of the patients ever spoke English, Clifford remembers her time at the house with particular fondness.

Donations come from all over the world to the Missionaries of Charity, but in spite of the amount of money coming in, there are so many causes it has to be spread thin. Though much free medicine and food is given to the needy, the staple medicines are, Clifford joked, "vitamins and holy water."

People in the Calighat house were usually suffering from cholera, typhoid, malaria, or tuberculosis (and often a combination thereof). Though these diseases may not all be life-threatening to the rest of the world, in a city where a broken leg could mean death, they are devastating.

Although the sisters give out free medicine for T.B., many patients still die from the disease. The shots need to be taken for a full year, and because many patients feel better after only a month, many stop the medication and quickly regress to their previous condition.

"And after a third time, a person's system becomes immune to the medicine... and

that's when the disease becomes incurable," Clifford said.

If and when a person did die, they were usually taken to the city's "crematorium" (or, more realistically, the city's wood pile).

When Clifford first arrived in Calcutta, "bombed city images came to mind," she said, but she added that an El Salvadoran friend sarcastically told her that Calcutta wasn't even that clean.

Though Calcutta has an official population of twelve million (and an unofficial population of eighteen million), it possesses not a single stoplight. In spite of the countless people and omnipresent poverty, though, Clifford quickly adapted to her new environment.

She lived in a house that cost two dollars a day—a price that was not even the city's cheapest. The two dollars included two meals every day, and was mostly British fare because the house's owner was an "Anglo" woman (half British, half Indian).

After seven weeks, Clifford left the city on the Ganges and went on a month-long trip to Nepal. Of the mountain country's beauty, Clifford said simply: "it was sublime."

From Kathmandu, Clifford followed a rut-covered "highway" on the side of a mountain to a small mountain town called Pokhara. She hiked in the mountains with a friend from Belgium, stopping at lodges along the way, until sickness forced her to take a small plane back to Pokhara.

Perhaps the most negative aspect of the trip for Clifford was the self-interested motives of many of the people she met. From the richest woman in Calcutta who took Clifford out to eat just so she could "find a job for her brother in Baltimore," to an apparently nice school teacher who asked her to marry her son, people often seemed to have ulterior motives when befriending Americans.

After several marriage requests, Clifford simply told her would-be suitors she was the wife of a doctor who owned two factories (doctors and wealth both being highly esteemed in Calcutta).

More esteemed in Calcutta than either doctors or wealth, however, is one elderly, Albanian-born woman known to the world as Mother Theresa. On one occasion, Clifford actually met Mother Theresa, and described her as extremely short and "very wrinkly," but a woman who had done an amazing amount of good in her life.

"And I don't want to detract from Mother Theresa at all," Clifford said, "but every day I met people who were such saints... at least as far as that word could apply."

Another famous person Clifford saw in Calcutta was Patrick Swayze. While in Calcutta, Swayze's new film *City of Joy* was being filmed, and Clifford mentioned the somewhat dubious privilege of having seen him and talked with the camera crew.

Ironically, it was *City of Joy*, the novel by Dominique Lapierre, which helped her decide she wanted to go to Calcutta and work with Mother Theresa. She had read much about Mother Theresa, but the book had her address and the simple prerequisite: "You need nothing but loving hands..."

And from this simple phrase, Clifford found the courage to travel halfway across the world and immerse herself in a culture entirely different from her own. For four months she saw a part of the world that most Americans don't get the chance to visit, and she not only saw, but for a brief period of time, came to know its hungry and its dying as only an insider can.

Though much more could be said, Clifford finished speaking, and I glanced down at what she had been painting. On the "sign" I read the lines from a poem by Walt Whitman, and couldn't help but wonder at their appropriateness: "There was a child went forth every day and the first object he looked upon, that object he became."



photo by Joan Malloch

Having taken time after graduation to travel, freshman Cary Clifford tells of poverty-stricken India.

Week at the Hut

Monday	7:00 pm	Canterbury Club	4:30 pm	Mid-week meeting for worship
Tuesday	5:15 pm	Episcopal Eucharist (Moon)	5:00 pm	GCRO meeting
	8:30 pm	Hillel (Passion Pit)	5:30 pm	Mass and student dinner
Wednesday	8:45 pm	FCA (Boren)	8:30 pm	InterVarsity (Boren)
	noon	Campus Ministers lunch (Cafeteria)	Thursday	GURU NANAK BIRTHDAY (Sikh)
		Brown bag lunch. Open discussion.	Friday	Quaker Concerns
			1:00 pm	Project Community