

a LIGHT in the darkness

As the world celebrates Mother Teresa's 100th birthday, one Billings woman remembers her time with this would-be saint

By **Julie Koerber**
Photography by **Lovely Cutler**



When Cheryl Moseley set off to explore the jagged-edge mountains of picturesque Nepal, she had no idea that a brutal crime, a sudden tragedy and one of the most beloved women of the 20th century would unite to change her life forever.

The year was 1972. Just a few years out of nursing school, the opportunity came to visit Nepal on a mountaineering expedition. Cheryl decided there was no time like the present. But during the trek, while the team was camped along the Khumbu Glacier not far from the Mount Everest base camp, a wicked storm brewed forcing the group to hunker down to try and survive. One of the porters leading the mission decided he needed to make it out of the area to search for food. “He died trying to save our life. He froze to death,” Cheryl says somberly. As the many days passed and her crew survived, Cheryl felt the aftershocks of what she had just been through. She decided to stay in India and find a way to pay back the Sherpa porter’s bravery.

“I just wanted to go and work in the Tibetan refugee camp,” Cheryl admits. “I thought it would be a good way for me to pay back the man who died trying to save our life.”

While working at the camp, Cheryl would break up her day by taking walks along India’s countryside. “One day, when I was walking, I noticed this little sign that read Missionaries of Charity. Mother Teresa was written in really small letters, and then it read ‘Nirmal Hriday (which means Pure Heart), Home of the Dying Destitutes.’ I had never heard of Mother Teresa.” After all, this visit was seven years before the world would come to know Mother Teresa as the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize recipient. Continually inquisitive, Cheryl decided to step inside. “Here comes this tiny little nun who walked up to me at the door and asked if she could help me. And, it turns out, it was Mother Teresa.”

Hunched over in a completely humble pose, Cheryl noticed right away the love in the woman’s eyes. She saw that in this small and humble home, nuns were working with the terminally ill and the poor. As a nurse, she felt called to stay. “I gave the lepers injections. I sterilized needles and did anything

else that was needed – feeding, washing, and giving out medications. Sometimes it was just being with people that you knew weren't going to live.” She adds, “It stirred my heart. I wanted to be around these nuns that had given their whole life to this cause. It was just such a gut wrenching experience.”

When Cheryl made the journey home, it was only because her visa had run out. The longing in her heart to return never fully faded. Over the next 20-some years, she would make the trip back to work with Mother Teresa eight more times. Each time she came unannounced and with each visit, she drew closer to the woman who would grab the attention of dignitaries one minute, and those literally living in the world's most impoverished conditions the next.

“She wasn't trying to make everyone well. She wanted to help people feel dignified and feel loved and cared for when they were dying,” Cheryl says. “We would take people off the street, or some were just dumped at the front of the mission.” She adds, “I have never seen poverty like I saw while I was there.”

With each trip, Cheryl explains it was like peeling back the layers of an onion. Each visit, she would get to know more about the nun who would one day be beatified for her work. And, with each visit, the layers were pulled back on Cheryl herself as she came to share something extremely dark that had been simmering in her soul.

Just months before she arrived on the mission's doorstep, “I got badly beaten and left for dead in Thailand.” As Cheryl pauses she slowly shares, “To have been raped, beat up, cut up and traumatized by three men repeatedly is not an easy thing to get over.” She admits it was conversations she had with Mother Teresa that helped her heal and forgive.

“She was intuitive and she knew the pain that you can carry inside and when she said to me, ‘You can't live your whole life like this. You've got to get over that and not live in the past or you are going to let those people control your life for the rest of your life.’” Cheryl is quick to point out, “There was no question that she was helping heal me as much as I was helping

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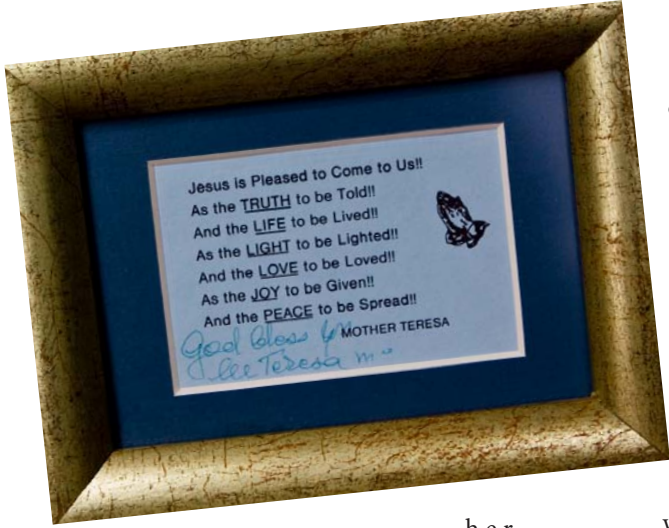
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decided to write a book about her time spent with Mother Teresa. “I had a lot of qualms about talking about my work with her because I didn’t want to feel like I was capitalizing on it, on her. Someone said to me in the past year, ‘Why would you feel that way? Why don’t you talk about her? Don’t you think that your experience with her would be helpful to others?’”

Cheryl admits. “Mother Teresa saw God in all people. I admired her for showing love, touching those who were sick – even when they had leprosy. She loved to have her hands on their heads and on their faces.” As she looks off into the distance, obviously calling to mind this period of her life, she says, “I feel incredibly blessed. That was a huge part of my life.” **YVW**

her with her work. To this day, I swear it was because of her that I was able to forgive those people.”

Now, 37 years later, many of Cheryl’s experiences still play vividly in her mind. “I used to think, ‘I am going to forget. I need to have pictures to remember it.’ But, I have never forgotten what that was all like.”

It wasn’t until recently that she began to flip through journals detailing her days in India. Thanks to the urging from several friends and her husband, she

And so, the writing began.

While Cheryl has no idea when she will wrap up her book, it’s been a cathartic process recalling the woman so revered and knowing what impact this tiny nun had on her life. She hopes that shedding some light on Mother Teresa and her mission will serve as a life lesson for others in compassion, forgiveness and healing.

“I learned a lot about compassion,”

Editor’s Note: As a part of Cheryl’s book, she is seeking comments and memories about Mother Teresa from others in the area who might have something to share. You can visit her on-line forum at www.friendsofmotherteresa.org. Part of the proceeds from Cheryl’s book will benefit the fund set up to honor her father who was born blind, the Wanah T. & Lillian Arnold Endowment for the Visually Impaired. The fund, through St. Vincent Healthcare, has been used in the past to aid visually impaired students in School District 2.