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Young Canadian Doctor Worked Year In India

Those who heard the petite and youthful Dr. Huguette Leger at the recent United Nations Association meeting in Richmond Hill were deeply impressed by the report of her year in the northern state of Orissa, India, as a Canadian Overseas Volunteer. A shortened version of her address follows her speak.

Dr. Leger graduated in medicine from Laval University and was selected as a Canadian Overseas Volunteer in the Spring of 1961. Since her return to Canada in July 1962, she has been specializing in Internal Medicine at Women's College Hospital, Toronto.

A Richmond Hill girl, Grethe Dahl, has just returned from serving as a nurse in Ceylon. These young graduates volunteer their services for a year; not only to give aid where it is sorely needed, but also to become themselves, world citizens. They will be in the vanguard of those who will build a better tomorrow.

The York Branch of the UNA has undertaken to raise \$2000 to send a young graduate overseas next June.

"It is unnecessary for me to say that the ten young Canadians who docked at Bombay in September last year were all eyes and ears, filled with curiosity and expectation; that we were one moment after the other, bewildered, dazzled, awestruck and enchanted. We felt that we had landed on a different planet. Everything was different: the people, their colour, their features, their clothes, the buildings, the streets with open-air shops, the vendors pulling carts and shouting over the bustle of the crowd. That first night in India we could not sleep as a nurse in a new town with new things to take single after-noon. As a final touch, an orchestra in the ballroom of our hotel played Latin-American tunes and people danced the rumba.

Next day we flew to Delhi where we met the Indian who had each of our postings and was to be responsible for us during our stay. Through him we met many persons directly interested in the movement of general development at the village level which has been sweeping the country since independence. Then followed a series of lectures in orientation organized by the Delhi University especially for foreigners; these included Indian history, institutions, politics, religions, social customs, art and music.

During our stay in New Delhi, the girls in the group were assigned to Indian homes to have their first contact with the basic unit of Indian society, the family. But it turned out that we were staying with well-off westernized families, living with the same facilities that we have here; as we found out later, this picture was not at all representative of the average Indian family.

Then came the time for us to take each our separate way from the city into the heart of India, its villages."

(Then followed a delightfully amusing account of train travel in India.)

"I had been asked to spend the first three weeks in the village where Gandhiji spent the last fifteen years of his life, a village called Sevagram in Central India and which had been set up as a model village. It had a hospital of sixty beds, well-equipped, staffed by two doctors. There I got acquainted with the organization of a village hospital, became familiar with the diseases prevalent in India, with the drugs most commonly used and so forth. This was not a government hospital; it was run by an organization called the All India Service Organization, a voluntary movement working in the spirit of Gandhiji at the development of village India. There I saw daily the in-patients and the out-patients, fifty to one hundred a day from the villages around. I had there my first contact with various diseases I had only read about: malaria, dysentery, leprosy, malnutrition, amebiasis, etc.

There I had my first ride in a bullock-cart with the doctor on his weekly visit to a village miles away. Slow, rough, dusty and hot, it took four hours going and coming, leaving the doctor three hours for dispensary work. The doctor's salary is about sixty dollars a month; his most precious possession is a bicycle.

At the end of three weeks, I

was anxious to get to my de-finite posting five hundred miles to the east, where I was to work in an area under the same project organization in a pilot service. This project was begun two years ago and since has concentrated its efforts in the agricultural, marketing and co-operative fields. The organization had been trying for some time to get a doctor to introduce a health and medical program. Few doctors are willing to work in the interior where facilities are at a minimum.

So I learned that I was to organize some sort of medical program for the area. Nothing had been done. I was to start from scratch without a clue! The doctor at the Sevagram Hospital had given me a list of the drugs I would need, since I did not know what diseases I would encounter or the names of the drugs available in India. He sent someone with me to the city forty miles away to buy the drugs and a few of the most needed medical instruments. Then I was ready for the jungle and all it had in store for me.

After a five hundred mile journey in a jeep, I reached the small village that was to be my home for eight months. Situated in a pretty area of hills and greenery, it had thirty mud huts, a primary school, a police station, a dispensary, four shops selling oil, rice, and cigarettes, and four restaurants or tea-shops. The largest building was the headquarters of the pilot project with its offices and co-operative stores; it had built several houses for its employees and their families. I was given two rooms in one of these houses.

This area, where I worked, was inhabited by tribes that have retained their primitive way of life. This situation is changing now through the efforts of government and volunteer agencies like the AISO. Who knows if they are doing the right thing, because in spite of poverty, these people are the gayest and seem to be the happiest I have ever met!

So that the people would learn of the presence of a doctor ready to take care of them, we selected six neighboring villages which I should visit, a walk of two to three miles for my interpreter and me. On our first visits we did not have many patients; these people do not readily give their confidence to strangers. So we went from house to house, inquiring from the sick on the day of my visit. In due time I began to hear of complaints as old as fifteen years, a belly-ache of twelve years, a wound, infected and running for three months. With what I had in hand, i.e., some kind of distorted history, a physical examination and pills, I found myself facing problems which had never occurred to me when I had the facilities of our modern Canadian hospitals. Furthermore I had to recognize unfamiliar diseases. I began by thinking I should never be able to help them, but when my anti-malarial treatment did work in a case of fever, I felt I was getting the hang of it. In January, two months after my arrival, I required a bicycle and by that time the patients gathered together on the day of my visit - eight or ten usually. In January, too, my first miracle occurred. I recognized a hookworm infestation in a patient, brought to me on a stretcher, swollen from head to foot, and unable to walk because of weakness and shortness of breath. Three weeks after treatment he was thin again and going about his work. I had many patients from his village.

When the time came for me to leave India, there was no opportunity to go to the villages; the sick came to me. My busiest day had a total of forty patients.

I do not pretend to have done much for the tribal people with whom I lived; my stay was too short; I was not equipped to treat them properly and I lacked experience. But I think I can say without boasting that these people, who before had used witchcraft, cow-dung and mud, and offerings to the gods, know that scientific medicine exists. This is a first step toward better health and adequate medical treatment. Unfortunately there was no one to carry on the little piece of work I tried to start. Maybe the people of North York will be responsible some day for sending a doctor to the little spot near the jungles of Orissa where I was happy for eight months."