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Rowe: Local man starts charity for kids in Calcutta

GREENSBORO -- On his way from India to Paris, Joseph Anderson couldn't shake the 1,400 digital images of India he had captured with his camera. MULTIMEDIA Click [here](#) to view a photo gallery.

He saw children fighting wild animals for scraps of garbage, a toddler gnawing on her filthy fist and a legless man holding up his one good hand, begging, his torso the size of a shoebox.

So, Anderson pulled out his black notebook. He started a list and wrote at the top of the page, "Before I die, I must ..."

One of his first commitments: "Start a charity for kids in Calcutta."

He has.

Through the Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro, he has created a charity that will raise money to help the poor kids of Calcutta. So far, he's raising money by organizing fundraisers, selling his photographs and writing a memoir about his experience. He'll soon start looking into ways to expand his lifelong effort.

All of the money raised -- dollar for dollar -- goes to fight the poverty and despair he saw halfway around the globe.

"It had to be done," said Anderson, a 43-year-old civil attorney who founded his own law firm in Kernersville 11 years ago. "It's 2006. India is an emerging superpower, and they're not doing enough for the poor. The problem is gigantic, and I want people to see it."

His photographs are on display at the Community Foundation's lobby through Friday. His travelogue, emotional and often poetic, was originally a Web log written for his mother so she could follow his travels. But the founder of Press 53, a small publishing company in Winston-Salem, read it and will turn it into a book this fall.

"The bare honesty of it all, as well as the clean, pure, from-the-gut writing," said Kevin Watson, who runs Press 53, "you don't find that too often,"

Yet, to understand Anderson's philanthropy, you have to understand his grief. You also have to realize this: Joseph Anderson misses his father.

He'll see a bird, an angel food cake or even a persimmon and think about the big, powerful man from

small-town California. And feel that pang of remorse.

He'll talk about how his dad loved persimmons, cooked an angel food cake for his wife's birthday every year and often told his son, "Joseph, I'd love to be a bird so I could fly."

His father, a retired surveyor, is gone, the victim of a tragic accident.

But Anderson hasn't forgotten the life lessons his father taught him. He's now a husband and a father to a 5-month-old girl named Georgia Camille. Every day he thinks of his dad -- "the North Star in my sky" -- and how he encouraged him to dive into life, fear nothing and help people in need.

That's where India comes in. His trip in December 2004, originally a chance to study yoga and meditation, became a journey of how to deal with his immense grief.

In August 2004, Anderson's father, James, was visiting his wife's 95-year-old mother in Kansas. While swimming in a river, he fell and hit his head on a log. The accident caused his brain to bleed and, within about a week, he died. James was 75.

Joseph Anderson thought about canceling his monthlong trip. His mother, Yvonne, told him no.

"I want you to go because your dad would want you to go," she told him. "It's a way of declaring we're not broken, and it'll give me something else to think about."

Anderson, a marathon runner, walked 20 miles a day in India, seemingly lost in his grief. But he soon realized the need to stop wallowing, and when he did, his whole trip changed. He opened up. He handed out food, took pictures and talked to the locals. Then, he saw the kids.

The kids lived in filth, sometimes surrounded by bodies and mounds of trash. Yet, they smiled. They smiled big and broad, chattering like birds around the tall, blue-eyed man with the long, blond ponytail walking through their streets with camera in hand.

As they rushed up, huddling around his knees, Anderson realized all that he had been given. And he realized all that he could give.

So, he's created Calcutta Children's Permanent Fund.

"It seems so corny but so palpable, but the gift the kids in Calcutta gave me keeps on giving," he said. "The inner fire I saw in them, and what it meant for me in my grieving shows me that hope conquers despair, and love overcomes fear. It would be easy for these kids to succumb to fear. But they didn't."

Anderson will call his memoir "The Light Within." And in light of what he's been through, that title seems pretty appropriate.

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