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Slideshow: Student creates artisan collective for India's City of Widows

MAY 18, 2009 | Advancing Knowledge Engaging our World

With support from a prestigious grant program, Katie Walter '09 will devote her summer to promoting peace in a small community in India. The international affairs major, who has long revered Indian culture and Hindu philosophy, traveled to India



independently and through a Lewis & Clark overseas program during the past few years. Inspired by what she saw during her travels, Walter will return to Vrindavan, India this summer to tackle what she believes are two major threats to peace in the area: poverty and gender inequality.

Vrindavan lies on the banks of Northern India's Yamuna River, not far from the site of the Taj Mahal. Believed to be the city where Lord Krishna grew up, Vrindavan is one of the most sacred sites for Hindus, featuring hundreds of temples devoted to Krishna's worship.

The holy city is also the site of overwhelming poverty and powerlessness for its most vulnerable residents: widows. Known as the City of Widows, Vrindavan has a total population of 57,000, of whom an estimated 15,000 are widows.

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"Destitute widows pour into the town, either in observance of centuries-old religious and societal prescriptions or because their families, unwilling or unable to support them, have abandoned them here," Walter said. "Fewer than one third of the residents have regular work; of those who do, many make less than a dollar a day. The high volume of tourists and pilgrims visiting the town creates a perception of economic opportunity, but a privileged few have already laid claim to the market for visitors' goods and services, leaving no room for newcomers to secure living incomes."



CLICK TO VIEW PHOTOS WALTER TOOK IN INDIA

Walter's project will target Vrindavan's widows and female immigrants as well as other members of the community who have no

viable means of supporting themselves.

"My project is called [Vrindaban ka Gaurav, or, Glory of Vrindavan \(VKG\)](#)," Walter said. "It involves the creation of an artisans' collective for the production and marketing of poshak, a needlepoint handicraft traditionally made by women in the Vrindavan area. My goals are to help create livelihoods for local people and to create a community surrounding this project in which skills can be developed and ideas can be shared."

Walter's work will be supported by a \$10,000 grant from philanthropist [Kathryn Wasserman Davis's 100 Projects for Peace](#) initiative, as well as an additional \$2,500 from Lewis & Clark. Capitalizing on connections she made with many organizations and nonprofits during previous trips to India, Walter will [partner with groups](#) that are already established in the Vrindavan area, such as [Friends of Vrindavan](#) and [Food for Life Vrindavan](#). Such collaboration will not only allow her to launch VKG quickly, but will also ensure its continued existence after her visit.

"All of my lodging is being provided for free by people I know in the area, so nearly all grant funding will go toward the project: coordinator and trainers' wages, training sessions, packaging supplies and initial poshak materials," Walter said. "It is my hope that this solid foundation for VKG will enable the collective to cover its own operating expenses and employee wages within the first year."

Walter also recently won a [Fulbright Research Grant](#) to study the salience of religious and economic themes in [advocating environmental stewardship in Vrindavan](#).

"It's clear that Vrindavan has myriad problems, including deforestation, over-development, water security issues, and unemployment," Walter said. "I know my project won't be able to help everyone, but I hope VKG can facilitate greater security for those most egregiously affected by these circumstances."

Giving widows and poor housewives a source of income will lead to the stability and dignity needed to create an overall environment of peace.”

This slideshow features images Walter took during her travels in India. These photos appear in an exhibition at Pappacino's coffee shop on Terwilliger through the end of May.

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About Lewis & Clark:

Lewis & Clark prepares students for lives of local and global engagement. Located in Portland, Oregon, the college educates approximately 2,000 undergraduate students in the liberal arts and sciences and 1,500 students in graduate and professional programs in education, counseling and law.

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