

Fabric OF LIFE

BY KATE HENNESSY

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU WANT TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE BUT YOU'RE NOT A DOCTOR OR TEACHER? YOU MAKE LIKE FASHION DESIGNER FRANCES CARRINGTON AND TAKE THE SKILLS YOU HAVE AND SHARE THEM WITH DISADVANTAGED/DISPLACED PEOPLE WANTING TO LEARN A NEW TRADE.

You might be lucky enough to have felt it yourself: a connection with a place that's both instant and profound. Maybe it's the light, the culture, or the architecture.

Whatever it is, you fit. For fashion designer Frances Carrington, this place was Delhi when she arrived in 1995. Denied her dream to do aid work in Africa, Frances was assigned a place by Australian Volunteers Abroad in India instead. "I'd visited a friend in South Africa and I really wanted to return to work somewhere in Africa — anywhere! Arriving in Delhi was a real shock. The pollution was extreme and there were so many people. I didn't know how to respond to the beggars, especially children or mothers with babies. I was wondering what I'd done, signing up to stay here for two years."

But for a fashion designer like Frances, colour is the equivalent of the poet's muse and no country has more colour than India. As the shock faded she realised she was hooked. "It was the people and the amazing colour. The women's clothes were combinations I'd never dream of and even the buildings and the food were colourful. And the people were optimistic against all odds."

Frances was sent 13 hours north of Delhi to Dharamsala, the political and spiritual capital for Tibetan refugees and home to the Dalai Lama. There, she managed the tailoring department at Norbulingka Institute, a place dedicated to preserving Tibetan culture. After Tibet's political and spiritual leader the Dalai Lama fled to Dharamsala in 1959, more than 150,000 refugees have followed. Sources aligned to Tibet's independence claim the 1949

Chinese occupation has caused the death of 1 million Tibetans, the destruction of 6000 monasteries, nunneries and temples and the imprisonment and torture of thousands.

At the foothills of the Indian Himalayas, nothing in Dharamsala is level. Everything was either uphill or downhill, recalls Frances, immediately enamoured of the dramatic landscape. "It was beautiful. There are extremely high Himalayan mountains behind the town with the plains of India below."

At Norbulingka, Frances worked primarily with female refugees, broadening their tailoring skills and teaching them to vary the design of the Tibetan national dress to appeal to Western tourists. "I taught them pattern-making so they could streamline their designs to sell in their shop and online. It was a lot of fun. Dharamsala was an easier place to be than Delhi. It's much smaller and the air is clean."

Just 21 years old at the time, Frances built Norbulingka's tailoring department from three to 15 people. Yet, unlike most foreign workers, Frances didn't want to return home to settle when her volunteer assignment ended. Sixteen years later she's still in Dharamsala, owner of one of the town's largest private employers, a fashion design business called Eternal Creation.

CHAOS AND COLOUR

"From the moment I left India the first time, I knew I would return. I missed the intensity of it — the colour, the people, the chaos, the challenges, even the smell. I couldn't stand the thought of not returning!" Coming back to Australia in 1997, Frances enrolled in an arts degree studying world religion



Clockwise: Frances Carrington at the Eternal Creations workshop, which employs members of different races, religions and castes; the Dalai Lama blessed the workshop, located in Dharamsala; Carrington began designing for children soon after the birth of her daughter in 2004; Carrington offers a free creche for the working mothers employed at Eternal Creations.

and Hindi. She taught pattern-making and tailoring part-time, practised the Vipassana meditation she'd learnt in India and dreamt of going back. She moved briefly to Germany to teach English and improve her Vipassana meditation skills. She also took another trip back to India. "I did a wonderful six-week car trip from Dharamsala in the north to Kerala in the south. It was fascinating as every region is completely different in dress, customs, language and food."

Frances quit her unfinished studies in Australia, deciding it would be easier to learn Hindi in India. By 1999, she was back in India, armed with a \$5000 business loan from her father. Indeed, it was her parents who inspired Frances to work independently. "My father was a merino sheep and cattle farmer," she explains. "My parents worked for themselves on the land and were in charge of their own lives, which was quite an influence on me."

Frances' parents were English and had moved to Western Australia in 1973 when Frances was born. They moved to Bega on the New South Wales south coast when she was five. Frances's two siblings were much older so at night she watched the news with her parents. This simple act sparked her keen social conscience. "When I was growing up there was trouble in South Africa and famines in Ethiopia. The news images were very vivid and made me determined to do something to help somewhere, somehow," she says.

When she was 14, Frances moved to Sydney to attend boarding school. After graduating she studied fashion design at what is now the Sydney Institute of Technology. Her creative leanings, too, she attributes to her family. "Dad came from a very artistic background. His



aunt is a very well-known English artist, Dora Carrington; his father, Noel, co-founded Puffin books and his sister was also an artist."

ETERNAL CREATION IS BORN

An older, more determined Frances returned to Dharamsala in 1999. She moved in with a friend and began working with a disabled tailor called Jampel, making simple products such as scarves and shawls. From these humble beginnings, Eternal Creation was born with the aim of producing quality women's sleepwear and accessories. "Two of Jampel's friends started working with us and I moved into my own place," says Carrington. "Our small workshop grew quickly and I started working with Gu Chu Sum, a Tibetan organisation for ex-political prisoners. Some of my tailors had suffered torture and privation at the hands of Chinese authorities in Tibet."

The early days were tough. They suffered fierce rainstorms in monsoonal Dharamsala as well as water shortages and blackouts. At that stage Frances was a single woman, which did not help. "I didn't really know what I was doing and was too trusting. Men tried to take advantage of the fact that I was female."

Another challenge was explaining delivery deadlines and international quality standards to employees who had previously led a pastoral or nomadic life. But Frances was not inclined to quit. She'd found a way to help using her own skills and, amid the difficulties, she found immense satisfaction in that. "Working at Norbulingka had made me realise I could do what I loved as a fashion designer and help others, too. I didn't need to be a doctor or a teacher to do something useful! My greatest inspiration was Anita Roddick from The Body Shop, who proved you can have a big business in a way that benefits everybody."

Frances's spirits enjoyed a tremendous boost when the Dalai Lama visited her workshop. "He held my hand and said, 'Thank you so much for doing this.' It was amazing!" she recalls. "The Dalai Lama thanked me? I was shocked. It had been so much hard work but from that moment onwards I knew it would work because the Dalai Lama had blessed it."

A few years later, however, Frances stopped working exclusively with Gu Chu Sum. The business was growing and she needed more skilled labour. "Working with a Tibetan organisation meant I could employ Tibetans only and I wanted to employ local Indians as well. So I started my own workshop in lower Dharamsala. There was still some resistance to tailoring techniques, though. The main issue was with men, who struggled with having a female boss. Now those guys have either totally changed their attitude towards women or left."



Carrington now employs around 80 staff members.

EQUALITY PREVAILS

Changing ingrained attitudes has been a big part of Frances's goal with Eternal Creation. The business is one of very few in India that employs people of different religion, caste, ability and race. Currently, the workshop is one-third Muslim, one-third Hindu and one-third Tibetan and employs a lot of low-caste people.

"I'm very particular about equality. In Australia that's really normal but in India there are many racial and social divides and the caste system is massive. When problems arise we bring everybody together and talk about it openly," she explains. "Most of the problems are actually not related to religion or race; they're within particular groups. We had one guy who ran away with another guy's wife — these sorts of things happen in any workplace."

Through sheer determination, Frances has succeeded in creating a harmonious environment. "At first some employees weren't happy working alongside people they considered inferior but now they are friends, eating and working together. It's like a big family, really, and the workshop definitely has a good atmosphere. Arguments still arise occasionally but employees used to say things like 'You're favouring Tibetans' or 'You're favouring Hindus' and that rarely happens now.

"As the business has grown, we've trained people on the job rather than hire management staff that would stifle the growth of other staff. They can improve their careers and their salaries by moving up through the ranks. My manager was originally a truck driver, for example, and the man who dispatches our orders started as a cleaner. My husband has trained an ex-monk to use Photoshop and Illustrator to help with the website."

Meditation is another way Eternal Creation supports equality by giving employees paid leave to attend meditation retreats. While many people in India meditate, most could never afford a 10-day intensive course. Vipassana meditation focuses on transformation through self-observation and introspection and is a great way to understand the workings of your own mind,

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enthuses Frances. "At meditation retreats you can be an 'untouchable' sitting next to a high-caste politician or army colonel. Being in a situation where lower castes are treated equally raises their self-esteem a huge amount. To me this is very important."

Now the employer of about 80 staff, Frances also appreciates the business benefits. "Our employees are much calmer after meditation and the aggression has evaporated. They return more motivated to work and influence others around them, too, who in turn want to meditate. One of our employees, Sanju, used to be extremely argumentative but has completely changed since he started meditating. He's very popular with other staff now."

FAMILY VALUES AT WORK

Visiting home in 2001, Frances met her husband Rory. "We met at a friend's party and he followed me to India," she explains. In 2004, the couple welcomed their daughter Imogen Ayasha to the world. Soon after, Frances started designing clothing for children and since the 2006 birth of her son Oscar, kids' fashion has all but eclipsed Eternal Creations' womenswear output. Characterised by lively prints, bright colours and a classical look, the children's line has found a strong market.

Imogen and Oscar have multiculturalism ingrained in them. They attend a distance education school with the children of some other Dharamsala foreigners and, on school days, they walk up a steep hill to study with Swiss, French and American kids in a school run by Tibetan, Hindi and Swiss teachers.

"The kids are very open to all kinds of people. They're learning Hindi and do lots of projects on local culture. Next week they're going on a camping trip to study migratory birds at a nearby lake and last week they went on a picnic in the mountains. I think Oscar has developed a bit of an Indian accent, which is quite funny!"

For working mothers like herself, Frances offers a free creche employing two Tibetan women full-time. "Many of our female workers are the family's main breadwinners, so it's essential for them to be able to return to work and still access good childcare."

Parents spend lunches and other breaks with their babies and children (there's no age limit) and breastfeeding mothers can visit throughout the day. Frances also arranges health workers to visit the workshop to give talks on children's health. "The babies receive quality, loving care with the security of having their mothers working in the same building and develop strong bonds with other

employees, who play with them. Parenting in Indian and Tibetan communities is often a group activity rather than a solo one, so the children grow up feeling very well-loved."

Indeed, even though the business offers three months paid maternity leave, many mothers return before that. "I think they prefer the warm, friendly and supportive atmosphere of the workshop, especially first-time mothers, single mothers or Tibetans with no family in Dharamsala. For these women, the mothers' group at the workshop is an essential part of their emotional wellbeing."

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Like most mothers, Frances starts her day in a rush, getting the children ready for school. "Invariably running late!" she admits. She walks to the workshop down a windy path with stunning views of snowcapped mountains. "At work, I check in with my sample tailors, who I make all new designs with, and once they're set up with the correct thread colour and lace, I walk around the workshop and check that each section is OK. Then I email and work on new designs. Tea break is at 11am and lunch is at 1pm, cooked for all employees by a lovely Sikh man called Bitu, who also makes the tea. We usually have lunch in the garden overlooking the river and the adjacent wheat terraces. Often we play badminton on the rooftop after lunch where we have a court set up.

After more chai at 4pm, Imogen and Oscar arrive after school. "They play on the swings at the workshop as well as dressing up in fabric offcuts. We go home at 5.30pm to a pretty standard family evening of dinner and baths, provided we have electricity, which is patchy in the winter time. No electricity means a candlelit dinner and a seriously early night!"

Ever-ambitious, Frances hopes to increase Eternal Creation's sales and further streamline the workshop's production process. "We're looking for some land to build a larger workshop as we're running out of space. We want to build in the traditional style of mud, stone and slate with a big garden where we can grow all the vegetables for lunches. Maybe even have a cow and chickens!"

Frances admits the past 15 years have been so busy she's barely had time to look back — or doubt herself. "I know what I'm good at and what I'm not good at. I'm good at designing clothes and training people. I'm definitely politically aware but I'm not an activist-type person — I'm a designer. I think through your work you can send a message to the world, which we do on every label on every garment." ☺