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# SOUTHWEST

## ORLANDO BULLETIN

Since 1986

*Ann Varkey of Southwest strives to make a difference in her community and world.*

### *A Woman Who Makes a Difference*

*by Christine Allen*

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Elegant homes line the streets of the Southwest subdivision where **Ann Varkey** and her family live. She has sold 34 homes in the neighborhood, and many more throughout the **Windermere** and **Dr. Phillips** areas during her 18 years as a Realtor.

However, this article is not about Ann Varkey's good fortune. It is about the good fortune she gives to others.

Varkey has a goal of beginning a charitable organization in the heart of Southwest Orlando. She is currently formulating her thoughts and discussing with friends and other like-minded people a workable plan to go out into the community and give to those less fortunate.

"Each of us can touch someone's heart every day," she said. "Together we can make a big difference in our community."

She and her husband, **Varkey Chacko**, believe and live by what they say. Varkey also puts her money where her mouth is. Each month, she writes checks for various amounts to different charities. She also gives something from her heart to handymen, housecleaners and workers who grace her doorstep, whether it be a few extra dollars added to their pay or an uplifting book. She does this with humility, telling each person that she is blessed by God, giving Him the credit for all that is in her life.

Believing she is directed by God in all her endeavors, Varkey had a special vision that she and her family should help people who suffer from Hansen's disease, commonly known as leprosy. The first known written mention of leprosy is dated

# A Woman Who Makes a Difference

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600 B.C. It was recognized in the ancient civilizations of China, Egypt and India — Varkey's country of birth. Throughout history, the afflicted have often been ostracized by their communities and families.

Varkey's sister, who resided in New Jersey at the time, was visiting family in their home state of Kerala, India, and was able to deliver clothing, medicine, oil and soap donated by Varkey to the women of a leper colony inhabited by 800 men and women. Through her sister, Varkey was able to support them by sending money directly to the colony, and she still continues to do so.

Varkey also sends money to various parts of India to provide for many items, including meals, clothes, blankets,

umbrellas, schoolbooks and more.

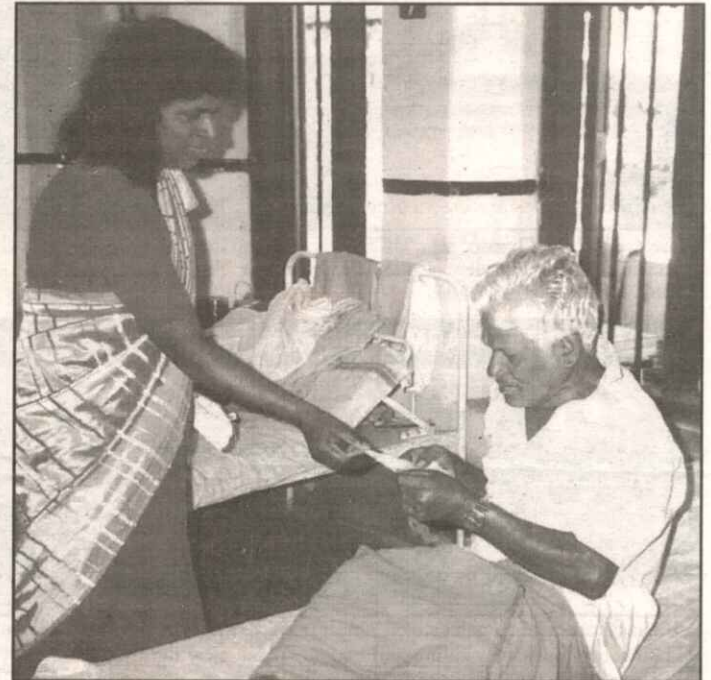
Worldwide, 1 million to 2 million people are permanently disabled as a result of Hansen's disease.

In 1998, Varkey and her husband and children traveled to Kerala and visited the leper colony.

"I wanted to teach my children the ways my mom instilled in my heart," she said.

Leprosy grows slowly, and the

incubation period of the disease is about five years. Symptoms can take as long as 20 years to appear. It is transmitted via droplets, from the nose and mouth, during close and frequent contact with untreated cases. Despite the fact that leprosy is highly contagious, she and Chacko went into the colony and comforted several patients at the facility. The desire to comfort these people was stronger than the fear of contracting the dreaded disease, however, Varkey advised her children to remain in the car. Among the patients covered in



Southwest resident **Ann Varkey** (left) offers words of comfort and a monetary gift to a leper in India.



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bandages, many of whom were bedridden, Varkey personally handed out envelopes of money and messages of hope, and told each person, "God loves you."

She continues to support the leper colony, helping to supply its various needs.

Varkey's giving spirit is a result of her upbringing. She was born in Kerala, one of the southern states of India, into a loving home with her praying mother; a dedicated father, who was a prisoner of war in World War II; and five brothers and a sister.

Varkey's father frequently told her she was special and a gift from God. Her mother constantly talked about how God sent her as a miracle baby and that she would take care of the poor during her lifetime. Varkey also went with her mother to visit the poor and sick.

"My mom stepping into [people's] homes was good luck to them, even non-Christians invited her in, and she would pray for them," Varkey said.

When Varkey began her first job, she started sending small amounts of money to those less fortunate in her hometown.

"My mom always told me that if I take care of the poor, sick and old, God would take care of me," she said.

Helping others is a part of who Varkey is. She has also ministered to inmates in the Osceola County Jail.

"Most people are just nice people, but due to a lack of training, they become the way they are or for some other problems, they are locked up," Varkey said of those she counseled in prison.

She also sponsors a one-day-meal program in Orlando and India. In response to the hurricanes that plagued Florida last year, Varkey sponsored a Care & Share mission. She also gives a portion of her real estate commissions to her clients' charities of choice when she lists their homes.

Although her life has not always been easy, she believes she is a living testament to how God takes care of people.

Varkey came to America in 1970 with only \$8 in hand — the maximum allotted by the government of India. Her two oldest brothers supported her. Two years later, she met and married Varkey Chacko — It is a custom in the area of India where Varkey grew up for a wife to take her husband's given name as her last name. The couple lived in Brooklyn, N.Y., where Varkey worked as a registered nurse and raised their children. At one time, when she was on maternity leave, there was only \$11 in the bank. Varkey thought she should return to work.

"No, you are to stay home," Chacko said. "God will provide."

Sure enough, a few days later, she received a check from a hospital where she had once worked. That check paid the mortgage and other bills.

"Everything is a miracle," Varkey said.

The family moved to Orlando when Chacko was offered a job transfer. They have resided in Southwest for 22 years.

Now, their children are grown. Their oldest daughter, **Susan**, is an attorney for the pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co. Their son, **Stephen**, is a staff scientist at DuPont, and daughter **Elizabeth** is pursuing a post-graduate degree in business administration

at Stetson University, while working with Varkey in her real estate office.

In May 2001, Varkey began to feel a heavy burden in her heart for Southwest Orlando.

"I wanted to give back to the community that really supported me in my business," she said.

It was in 2002, after the sudden deaths of her only sister and oldest brother, just three months apart from each other, that Varkey realized her burden should be formalized into a plan and that the life God has given should not be taken for granted.

Although the plan is still in the embryonic stage, Varkey has been talking with some of her clients, friends and others about forming an organization through which she

can provide assistance to those who are sick, homeless and poor.

"My mind will not rest until I help 10,000 people," Varkey said.

Her vision is extremely broad.

"I would like to bring people with different illnesses, like cancer patients or those with diabetes or heart problems, and give them support and counseling. I'd like to offer help to young people — educate them to be better citizens."

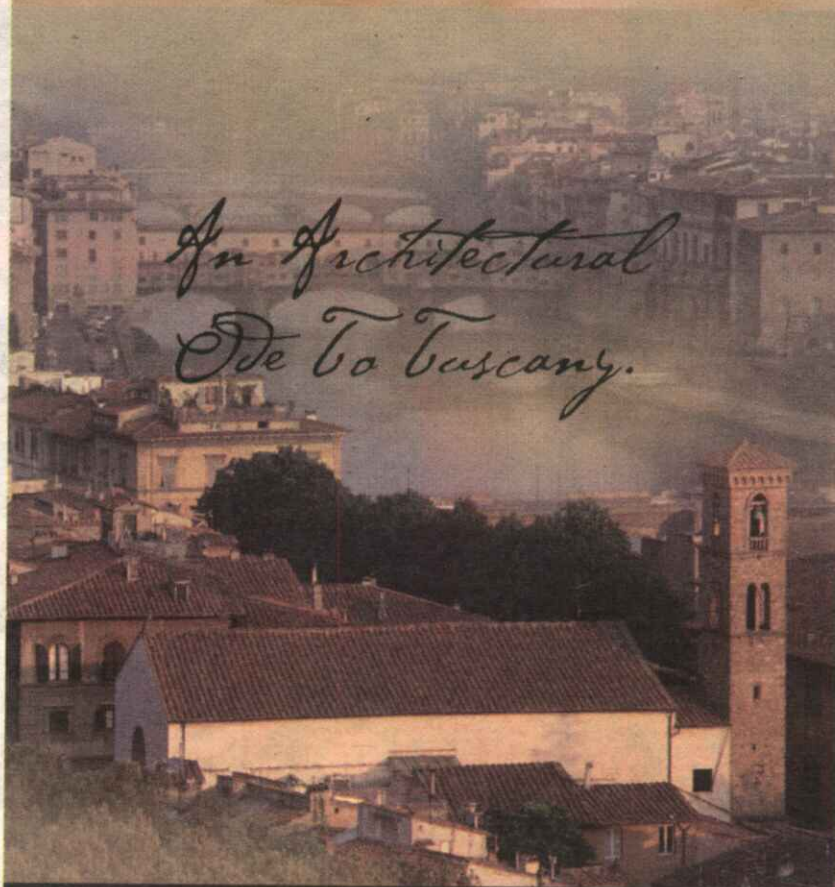
Other aspects being considered are to give scholarships to students; help widows and the elderly by setting up a volunteer system of people who will shop, cook or go to the pharmacy for them; or organize groups that visit nursing homes or provide voluntary car and bus service to ill people.

While many of these services are already offered through a variety of charitable organizations, Varkey envisions a focal place in Southwest Orlando, where all of these avenues of helping others can be coordinated — one central place people know they can go to for help.

"The chain of help is a pyramid," Varkey said. "By helping each other, we can win the world. I want to let people know that life in this world is short, and we must live it to our best potential."

A lofty vocation from one who asks God every day how she can be a blessing to someone, which in its simplest terms is what many people feel compelled to do — give personal attention to everyone, both rich and poor, sick and well. □

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