

“I don't want the limelight”

At 42, Sylvia Wright sold everything to work with the poor in India. Thirty years on, she's still there, changing thousands of lives for the better

By Carole Richards

Few of us are driven as hard by our conscience as Sylvia Wright. Up at sunrise and in bed at sunset, seven days a week, the 72-year-old nurse and former nun packs more into her 17-hour days than women half her age. She's up walking the dog at 5am, then in her Indian hospital from 8am until 6pm, when she heads to her school for deaf children for two hours. After feeding the herd of cows and eating a late supper, Sylvia finally falls into bed around 10pm.

“It sounds an horrific life,” she admits almost apologetically, “but it's not. I love helping patients, making them comfortable and easing their pain.”

She admits it was not an easy decision to leave her comfortable life as a senior nurse lecturer in Yorkshire to answer a calling to India: “I didn't really want to do it.” So what motivated her? While her religious belief was clearly a major influence, this is not a subject Sylvia likes to talk about.

“I believe religion should be a private affair and I can't say I've



‘I am not a saint. It's just my conscience that drives me on’

never doubted God, because I have. I'm not a saint. It's just my conscience that drives me on. It's something deep inside. I don't really know how to describe it.”

Brought up in Leeds, Sylvia first ventured inside a Catholic church as a teenage student researching the history of the Reformation. She was soon converted to the faith and, with a strong impulse to serve others, began training as a nurse at 18. By the age of 23, she felt a calling to join a convent in Cambridge.

“I realised almost at the beginning that convent life was not for me. Nobody wanted me to leave and in a way I didn't want to,” she recalls. But after three years, much praying and many tears, she did just that.

Despite one or two opportunities to marry and have a family of her own, Sylvia's life didn't take that course and she resumed her nursing career. When her mother – whom she'd nursed – died, she was free to change the direction of her life.

Sylvia, then 42, inherited a family property and had a comfortable life with a wide circle of friends. “But I just felt there was something more I should be doing. More and more

I felt I should sell up and give to the poor.

“After six months of struggling with the idea I made my decision even though my brother thought I was mad and wanted to know why I couldn't be normal like everyone else!”

In reply to a letter, Mother Teresa suggested Sylvia might join an order of nuns in India. “Having already tried

being a nun, I didn't feel it was the way to go,” Sylvia admits. So, after selling all her worldly goods and cashing in her NHS pension, Sylvia headed off on her own to the villages of southern India.

Seeing the poverty, malnutrition, poor housing and drought at first hand, she felt she could be of use – and stayed. Using her own money, Sylvia launched a mobile clinic, treating up to 400 patients a day. Three years later, she acquired a small hospital, but then her money ran out.

Friends back home supported her in setting up a charity – The Sylvia Wright Trust. Since then, she has developed a modern hospital, a school for deaf children and two day centres for disabled children, as well as a nurse training college and community health projects.

Sylvia's work, which has earned her an MBE and an OBE, is non-denominational and early fears among locals that she was out to convert them to Christianity have been dispelled. She attributes her down-to-earth attitude to her Yorkshire upbringing: “There's work to do, so I do it, though I'm always aware of things I could have done better.” The only epitaph she wants is: ‘She did all right’.

Her friends, like charity trustee Tony Hartigan, would say she's done more than all right. “Sylvia is modest and unselfish about her achievements. These are, however, outstanding and have been driven by her incredible work rate, her forceful personality and her determination to overcome every obstacle.”

Changing children's lives for the better

Two hundred profoundly deaf children in Sylvia's school are sponsored individually by UK supporters.

The Trust has set a target this year to find sponsors for another 25 children whose education, care, clothing and accommodation costs £30 per month. Sponsors pay what they can afford. All donations, however small, are gratefully received and acknowledged.

Sylvia says: “The children love to receive cards and small presents from their sponsor for special occasions like Christmas and birthdays. Many have never received a birthday present before and it is a real delight to see their excitement and pleasure.”

❖ **To find out more about sponsoring a child** and becoming a ‘Friend in the West’, contact: Angela Clark, Sylvia Wright Trust Sponsorship, 3 Eddison Walk, East Causeway, Leeds LS16 8DA. Tel: 0113 2677660

❖ **For more information** about Sylvia's charity, visit www.sylviawright.org



Sylvia's dedication has brought fresh hope to many deaf and disabled children in southern India