

# Didi's old people

Didi's brother, the Rinpoche, is back in Canada along with those who accompanied him to Tibet in August, and the reports and photos have arrived! Didi, you will remember, accompanied her brother to Tibet last year, and while her brother made arrangements for the building of the health centre, Didi was saddened by the plight of 20 old ladies in a home in Zadoh, the small town near Didi's family land.

Two of the western women who went with the Rinpoche have sent us reports of their visit to this home. Lana Weber writes: "I had the chance to visit a group home where the enclosed photos were taken. This series of living spaces was dedicated to elderly women, most of whom, from what I could understand, did not have extended families to take care of them in their old age. The home was tucked away through a series of mud-strewn alleyways and corridors. It has an open centre courtyard with rooms in an L-shaped format. The ones I could see inside of had a basic packed

dirt floor and a small clay stove for heating and cooking." Lana handed over the money collected in the West for this project to a Tibetan lady, Mrs. Karnon, who was to oversee the purchases of basics "to make them comfortable in their old age".

Michele Davidson was with Lana when she made the presentation, and sends this report: "The location is in a filthy area near the river, which serves as the town's garbage dump. The short drive in to the residence was extremely muddy and bumpy. This little stretch of dirt track would make for treacherous walking for a young person, never mind a senior. It was also extremely dirty with much litter and garbage and many foraging dogs.

When we arrived at the collection of ramshackle dwellings where these seniors live, I must say I was shocked. The residences are very simple, as are many residences in Zadoh, but there was minimal protection from the elements other than basic walls. In some cases the windows had no glass.

The people were happy to have visi-



tors. Although quite raggedy in appearance, they eagerly gathered for a group photo. I found this visit to be quite an emotional experience for me. While I realize that living conditions in many areas of the world are nowhere near as comfortable as my own, I was greatly disturbed by the situation of these elder citizens of Zadoh.

Their poverty assigns them to the least desirable area in this community. They are living surrounded by garbage. They live without heat. They live without enough food. They live without even moderately clean or substantial clothing. They live without consistent medical attention, and certainly for those suffering from mental disturbance, there was no support specific to their needs. They need all the basics.

Before I sign off, I'd like to share with you a bright moment from this visit. These people keep a pet cat. The cat has a cute collar of cloth. One of the women picked up the little creature with such gentleness and cradled it in her arms during our visit. The others often reached out to pet and stroke it.

Seeing their kindness to the cat and the obvious desire to nurture it, even in the midst of such despair, made my eyes well up. I was inspired to see that love survives in spite of tremendous physical challenge."

Didi has supplied some extra facts. Lana is right that most of these ladies have no family. One or two do, but they are so poor they cannot take care of the old ladies, and in fact leave their children with granny while they work. Lana commented on the children who



gathered around. A couple were grandchildren, but most were local kids who had never seen a "white" person before! These ladies are of the generation which suffered terribly during the Cultural Revolution and often witnessed horrific tragedies to their families. No wonder they are mentally and emotionally scarred. The Chinese-built home, although basic in the extreme, is quite well built. The walls and roof are sound, and do not leak. The garbage dump at least provides cardboard and plastic - to burn in their little stoves for a meagre heat, to cover the broken windows and to insulate the floor. The concept of a group home is foreign to the Tibetans, who under normal circumstances would have looked after their elderly relatives, but the local Tibetan community is doing what it can. The community provides each lady with the equivalent of \$60 a year, and local housewives bring their leftover food to the home.

Mrs. Karnon's parents and parents-in-law had all been orphans who were looked after by Didi's grandfather before the Chinese invasion. They had grown up under his care, looking after his family's animals. These people are incredibly loyal to the family of their old lord, whom they revered. It is a lovely karma that Mrs. Karnon is now able, through Didi, to help others in need, just as her parents were helped by Didi's grandfather. Ironically, the Chinese gave good educational opportunities to children like Mrs. Karnon and her husband, because they had been so "oppressed" by the local lord, whereas Didi's cousins, being aristocrats, were denied an education.

Mrs. Karnon is the head of the local Tibetan women's organization. She has told Didi that with the funds from TRAS donors she has been able to purchase a mattress for each of the

20 old ladies, 6 beds and was in the process of getting blankets for each person. The money didn't stretch as far as 20 beds, but the mattresses and blankets will provide needed warmth this winter. Once again, grateful thanks to those who contributed to this project.

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