

“I couldn't walk away”

The desperate plight of abandoned war babies shattered Caroline Cook's dreams of domestic bliss – but enriched her life beyond measure

By Carole Richardson

oving children – irrespective of sex, creed or colour – is in Caroline Cook's DNA. That's why she's spent the past 15 years helping to reunite and rehome thousands of orphaned, abandoned or vulnerable youngsters with their own families or foster families worldwide.

A former nanny who trained at the Princess Christian College after leaving school at 18, Caroline (68) admits: “I've always adored children and would love to have had many more. So, too, would husband Mark (66) with whom she co-founded their international charity, Hope and Homes for Children, in 1994.

Fate, though, had other plans for them. Immediately after their 1967 wedding, the pair began married life in army quarters in the Far East, where Mark was serving with the Gurkha Regiment.

Attempts to start a family met with no success for a heartbreaking seven years. “My maternal instinct had

‘Helping children is so rewarding. It's a very different life to what I'd planned but I've no regrets whatsoever’

always been there and it was devastating not to have a child straight away,” she recalls.

Returning to England, Caroline and Mark decided to adopt, welcoming three-month-old Edward (now 38) into their lives. Their joy doubled when Caroline fell pregnant with William (now 37).

Much of their childhood was spent in the Far East, but they returned to England in the early Nineties, when Mark was posted to a base in Wiltshire.

After 25 years as an army wife, Caroline relished buying their first proper home, but what happened next was totally unexpected. Posted to the Balkans as the British UN Commander, Mark was shocked by the horrors he saw in Sarajevo. Returning home, he told Caroline how upset he'd been to discover 44 orphans cowering in the basement of a shelled-out children's institution. He knew he had to act to help them, but needed Caroline. “We agreed together we really must do something to help. It seemed the right thing to do at that time.”

Mark resigned his Army



Making a difference – Caroline's charity has helped change the lives of countless children caught in conflict

commission and, with the help of a friend in the newspaper business, the pair posed as journalists heading for Sarajevo.

“It was quite scary,” she admits, recalling how they had to sit on wooden pallets on a noisy Russian humanitarian plane. During that three-day visit to the war-ravaged area, Caroline found the children who'd been abandoned in the cellar of the shelled building.

“I don't cry that easily but it was heartbreaking. Their eyes told the whole story. They were frightened and bewildered. I just felt complete disbelief to see children in such appalling



conditions. You could not help but compare their lives to those of your own children.”

Returning home, determined to make a difference, Caroline wrote thousands of personal letters to anyone they could think of, begging for help. “It is amazing how generous people are and very humbling. One lady

‘Children need buckets of love – whether that's from their own family or from a foster family’

has just written, giving us her winter fuel allowance.”

Soon afterwards, Hope and Homes for Children was formed. By 1996, the Sarajevo orphanage had been rebuilt. “I'll never forget the joy and elation on their faces,” she recalls. But when the children were asked what they really wanted

most, ‘I want a family!’ was the overwhelming response. As a consequence, they changed the charity remit to focus on reuniting and rehoming children with birth or foster families.

“Children need love – buckets of love – and they need a family whether that is their own family or a foster family. Love is what makes the world go round,” says Caroline.

Now, three weeks after the birth of her first grandchild, Caroline is filled to the brim with love and pride. With baby Sebastian safely here, she can confess what she'd never have admitted beforehand – that she very secretly hoped for a little boy. “He's the apple of our eye and we're absolutely thrilled to bits. Becoming a gran is everything I hoped it would be and more!” she says. But Caroline has plenty of love to spread around to children across the world. Today, the charity works across nine countries in Europe and Africa and how many thousands of children they've helped is “utterly impossible” to estimate. The charity goes into ravaged war-torn areas ‘when the TV cameras have moved out.’

“If we don't help these children who will?” asks Caroline, who two years ago received an OBE for her work. She adds: “It is a very different life to what I had planned, but I've no regrets whatsoever. It is so rewarding and you can't just walk away from something like this.”



To support or find out more about Hope and Homes for Children, visit www.hopeandhomes.org or telephone 01722 790111.

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