

WOMAN of interest



Have pen, will travel

“Stone Soup” cartoonist Jan Eliot travels to Africa and Thailand, helping plenty of people along the way.

JAN ELIOT

Age: 59

Profession: Cartoonist

Hobbies: Traveling and photography

Family: Husband, two daughters
and three grandsons

By L.J. Sellers
Photos by Collin Andrew
SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS

Jan Eliot learned a few things about herself last fall while traveling on back-to-back international excursions. First she discovered a love for tuk tuks, little three-wheeled taxis, and wrote her own ideal obituary: “Died in a tuk tuk in Thailand while on a humanitarian mission.”

While traveling in Algeria, she had a more serious self-discovery. “I realized I had started to allow myself to feel like I was getting a little bit old,” Jan recalls. “And I thought, ‘Damn, I’m not old. Look where I am. I’m in Algeria, and I’m by myself for a week. And there are checkpoints and people with machine guns everywhere.’”

Cultural ambassador

How did the Eugene creator of the “Stone Soup” comic strip end up in Algeria?

She received an invitation from the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs to attend an international gathering of cartoonists held in Algiers. The exhibition’s hosts invited mostly cartoonists from French-speaking countries, but they also wanted a well-known American female political cartoonist, and they asked the U.S. Department of State to choose someone. Sensitive to diplomatic relations, the state department wanted to send a cartoonist who wrote a strip about a family, and they narrowed it down to Lynn Johnston (creator of “For Better or For Worse”) and Jan Eliot.

“Lynn was already committed to an exhibition in Montre-



To read more about Jan's travels visit her blog at www.stonesoupcartoons.com.

al, so it came to me," Jan says. "And I said, 'Sure, I've never been to North Africa. I'll go in minute.'"

At the exhibition, Jan met graphic artists from around the world and gave talks about how comic strips are created and syndicated, which is unique to the United States. She also participated on a panel and answered questions about censorship of the marketplace vs. the legal censorship that cartoonists in Africa experience.

"I got bolder as I went along and talked about a lot of feminist principles, too," Jan says.

While she was there, she also visited an orphanage, a troubled-child center and a women's shelter — accompanied by a bodyguard everywhere she went.

The U.S. Embassy in Algeria had sent out notice to neighboring countries that an American cartoonist would be visiting, so Jan ended up making a side trip to Morocco, where she gave talks at four graphic arts schools in four days. She spoke with students in Casablanca, Rabat, Tangiers and Tetouan.

"Some of the students I met looked as if they had come in their one change of clothes," she says. "But everybody had a USB stick, so they could put it in any computer that opened up and show their work."

Many of the artists she met gave Jan samples of their work to bring home, and she cherishes the cocktail napkin on which a student drew her a caricature of himself.

House #52

Soon after unpacking from Algeria, Jan was back in the air. This time she flew to Thailand with Women Build, a subgroup of Habitat for Humanity, and spent a week laying bricks in the heat. She worked side-



Jan met graphic artists from around the world, including Mazin of Yemen, who drew her a caricature of himself in traditional dress.

by-side with the Thai family who would occupy the completed house — House #52 — one of 82 being built in Chiang Mai in honor of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 82nd birthday. The home Jan helped to construct is small and simple by American standards, but a luxury for the receiving family.

"We're building houses for people who have been hauling water from rivers and sleeping under corrugated tin," she explains. "So to have a cement block house with a cement foundation and plumbing with running water is a huge step up."

In the evenings, the crew (which included Jet Li and Janet Huckabee) was free to have fun.

"You could get on the bus and go to posh hotels and see a show or be exposed to the Thai culture in

any way you wanted," Jan says. "Or jump in a tuk tuk and go see it for yourself."

Jan's involvement with Women Build started seven years ago when the group contacted her to create an illustration for its Girls Build educational materials, featuring her young comic strip characters, Holly and Alex. Next Jan designed a T-shirt for Women Build that showed her adult characters, Val and Joan, holding building tools.

"The whole goal of Women Build is to get more women involved," Jan says. "And to make sure they learn the skills and are not just doing the fetching."

Eventually Women Build sent Jan to work sites to pound nails for a day in hopes of using her well-known status to attract the media. Jan worked on a house in New Orleans as part of the Hurricane Katrina rebuild, one in Suffolk County, N.Y., and one in Silverton. Then came the invitation to fly to Thailand and join the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Foundation for a full week of construction.

International travel is not a new experience for the cartoonist. Her sister lives in Austria and her daughter is in Germany, so Jan travels overseas frequently. She's also visited Switzerland, Italy, Greece, France, Spain, Portugal, England, Scotland, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Turkey, Uganda, Kenya, Zanzibar, Canada and Mexico. Next up? Probably Australia.

"I can't think of another reason to work than to be able to travel," Jan says. "I'm not happy unless I have a plane ticket in the drawer and something in the works."

Staff writer **L.J. Sellers** can be contacted at dash@registerguard.com.

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