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# Baltimore

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## NECESSITY MOTHERS INVENTION, AGAIN

BY STANLEY HERMAN

"It was job hunting in a rickshaw," says Charlene Riikonen, recalling her first weeks in Bangladesh in 1982. "I had given up my apartment, sold my car, got a three-month visa, and just went. I said to myself, 'I can't believe I'm doing this,' but somehow it just seemed right."

Riikonen is a fiftysomething mother of three with a self-confidence that inspired the Columbia resident and former globe-trotting Army brat to leave her job as a University of



Maryland administrator in search of "something more." She found it in the former East Pakistan, a desperately needy country wracked by years of war, where her job hunt led to several years in a medical center. Cholera was rampant, and victims often died of dehydration, just as do sufferers of other serious diseases, such as dysentery and AIDS. But from her experiences there, Riikonen helped develop oral rehydration solutions that she's since brought home in the form of a new product, and a new business. It's called CeraLyte and it's making a difference from Third World countries to the Persian Gulf.

"A case of severe dehydration brought about by cholera can kill a full-grown adult in less than 8 hours," says Riikonen. "When we introduced oral rehydration solutions in Bangladesh, we reduced the fatality rate of cholera patients from 50 percent to less than 3 percent immediately." Oral rehydration solutions (ORS) are a mixture of water, salts, and carbohydrates that helps the body retain fluids, often serving as a fast and inexpensive alternative to intravenous treatment in hospitals.

In 1993, Riikonen established Cera Products in Jesselton, Malaysia. **Riikonen: An ORS just for you**

sup. Working alongside doctors from Johns Hopkins University, Cera Products developed an improved rice-based ORS called CeraLyte that was purchased by medical facilities around the world, as well as by AIDS treatment centers and homeless shelters. One of its biggest customers was the U.S. Department of Defense, which used the solution in the Persian Gulf and Kosovo.

But like so many innovations that start on the battlefield or in space, a version of CeraLyte may soon land on supermarket shelves, next to the Gatorade. Enter Cera Sport, another ORS that's marketed at a clientele ranging from football teams to bicyclists in Cycle Across Maryland (Cera Products is an official sponsor).

After negligible first-year revenue of \$6,800, Cera Products recorded over \$1 million in sales last year, with more products in the works, including an ORS targeted towards animals, as well as a variety of new flavors for CeraLyte and CeraSport (Maui Wauai, anyone?).

Says Riikonen of her rickshaw gamble eight years ago, "What could be better than to create a business that would save lives, reduce health-care costs, and at the same time hopefully make some money?"

BRYAN BURRIS