

# Student gets unique opportunity to visit Nepalese school

Delivered money for girls' school as part of local sister city program

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Emerald Contributor

In October 1990, I traveled to Nepal as a volunteer with the Eugene/Kathmandu Sister City Committee. It was a job that took me to a part of Nepal not ordinarily seen by foreign visitors.

## Reporter's Notebook

I was there to deliver \$600 to Sidha Pokhari, a village in eastern Nepal that is four days' walk from the nearest road. The money was part of a scholarship donation from Eugene to pay for one year of elementary school for 20 village girls.

At 10 a.m., my bus reached the city of Dharan in the flat, southeastern part of Nepal. I had been traveling all night from Kathmandu. Exhausted after 400 kilometers of jarring potholes and the whining of Hindi music, I emerged from the bus into daylight as if from a dream.

Still hours away from the point where I began walking, I boarded another crowded bus and spent a day traveling straight up into Nepal's Himalayan foothills.

I found myself in Basantpur - literally the end of the road. It is rutted with mud and dung, and I spent the night in a cubicle at the Yak Hotel amid clouds of cooking smoke and the blaring of Radio Nepal.

The next day I awoke, found the trail and began walking uphill. Soon I was lost. Unfortunately, I had only a crude map, sketched for me in pencil by a University graduate student who had worked in the region.

Remembering with a touch of regret her desire not to "engineer my experience," I soon realized the map had lost all relevance to my surroundings. Cursing, I resigned myself to a series of climbs and descents of deeply vegetated valleys, in search of a trail leading to the village in which I had planned to spend the night.

Fat spiders hung motionless above the trail at every stream crossing, and lush jungle closed in on both sides, creating a green corridor through which I walked. When passing the numerous terraced fields that are cut into the hillsides, I called out to stooped workers the name of the village I was looking for.

"Mamling? Mamling?" I ask. They nodded, urging me on. Finally, I found the village and passed the night there.

The next few days I spent in the same manner, traveling toward the school through Nepal's humid Sankuwasabha District - a region rich in orange, banana and grapefruit trees, steep jungles, rushing creeks and muddy trails.

A Westerner traveling alone through these remote hills, far from the touristed trekking

routes, is an unusual sight, and there were many questions concerning my visit. Because I speak but a few words of Nepali, I could communicate the purpose of my trip only to the few natives who spoke English.

I told no one, however, of the 21,000 rupees in my pack in a stack of bills one-inch thick.

On the fourth day of hiking, I reached my destination, the village of Sidha Pokhari. The village sits on a sharp ridge in the fertile middle hills between Nepal's flat southern terai and its looming Himalayan mountains, which can be seen from the village along the northern skyline.

With difficulty, I located the home of the school headmaster, Indra Prasad Shrestha, and handed to him the envelope containing the money. He is a kind, handsome man of 50 who converses easily with his numerous children.

The next day, Indra Prasad showed me the Sidha Pokhari school, a two-story stone building of eight rooms where 200 children take classes in six different subjects.

The sound of a pipe ringing on a metal bar signals recess. Students run to play in an adjoining field, where water buffalo submerge themselves in a small pond.

Every morning from the schoolyard, the white form of 27,790-foot Makalu and its surrounding peaks can be seen rising above low clouds. By 10 a.m., the clouds cover the summit, hiding the mountains from view until the next day.

Surprisingly, the girls designated to receive the scholarship money did not know they had been chosen. Wearing looks of bewilderment, they were brought into the headmaster's office.

The entire school, in fact, was in an uproar over my unexpected visit. Classes had been hopelessly disrupted, and students crowded the window of the room, trying to figure out what was going on.

Indra Prasad spoke to the girls for the first time about it, informing them that they had been awarded scholarship money.

They seemed shocked. Some of these students walk for two hours from their homes each day to attend school. Most of their families survive on subsistence farming and by trading at a weekly market.

Without the scholarships, most of the girls would not be able to attend school past the fifth grade because the little money that most Nepalese families set aside to pay for school is usually spent on their sons.

Although the language barrier created a distance between the students and myself, their faces expressed the same shyness, humor and concern of children from my own country.

I stayed in the area for several days, taking pictures, observing classes and staying with a family that lived near the school. A daily soccer game at

the end of town occupied my afternoons.

Soon, though, I was alone on the trail north, returning to Kathmandu by a different route. The strange silence of hills muffled by soft forest en-

veloped me once again.

One part of my journey in Nepal was over, but I look forward to the future months I will spend here, carrying out other duties as a volunteer and traveling through the country.

Hiking in the direction of white mountains draped in clouds, I watched the rising of the sun, while barefooted porters, heavy loads hung from their foreheads, walked silently past me.

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