



A3 STUDENTS HEADED TO NEPAL INCLUDE: ETHAN VARNER, SATYSHA WHITWORTH, ZIA LASKY, KATIE HIBBARD, MORNING GLORY RITCHIE, MAIA MENDELSSOHN AND MASON WINGERT. NOT PRESENT JESUS HEWITT

PHOTO COURTESY ED MENDELSSOHN

SPRINGFIELD STUDENTS GO TO NEPAL

Students from the Academy of Arts and Academics (A3), a public high school in Springfield, will head to Nepal in October to volunteer, hike the first stages of the Everest Trek and visit the U.S. Embassy.

Mike Fisher, the school's director and a former volunteer with the Peace Corps, and Ed Mendelsohn, the school's managing director, say they started planning the trip last winter after a visit to the Tacoma School of the Arts.

The Tacoma School had "about a year previous done a trip to Nepal under the same circumstances," Fisher says. "They had someone on their staff that had been a Peace Corps volunteer there." Mendelsohn realized that something similar could transpire at A3, which inspired Fisher to start planning.

Fisher last visited Nepal in 2008 and is still familiar with the language, he says, which made it a logical choice.

A3 focuses on project-based learning, centered on the idea that giving students authentic experiences will better prepare them for life beyond high school. Mendelsohn says that traveling fits into A3's teaching philosophy because "there are all kinds of things you have to do when it

comes to traveling that teach you and expose you and force you to practice things you otherwise wouldn't."

Fisher describes the trip as less like a "typical high school experience" and more like a foreign exchange program where the students earn credits for their work.

"This isn't going to be an exotic vacation," Fisher says. "It's a learning experience." Part of the process includes a class that lasts all semester. Every morning, the students will cover topics relevant to their upcoming trip such as language, diplomacy and sciences, including biofuels and geology.

"It would be a shame to go all the way to the Himalayas and not talk about the geology of that range," Mendelsohn says of covering sciences.

The six sophomores and two juniors will begin their trip Oct. 21 with eight days in the small village of Suryanagar, in the southeastern plains near the Nepal/India border, not far from a village where Fisher previously volunteered.

Although they are not volunteering in relation to the 2015 earthquakes that killed almost 9,000 people in Nepal, Fisher says the students will teach English in small sessions and live with families in the village. "We'll have a sort of in-depth experience of what it's like to be in a third world," he says.

Maia Mendelsohn, a sophomore at A3 and Ed Mendelsohn's daughter, says she's excited to learn about a culture that differs greatly from her American experience. "Since we're in America, we have a 'normal' American way of doing things and since they're in Nepal, their 'normal' is so much different than ours," she says.

During the students' stay in the village, the Nepali people will be between a pair of major Hindu festivals, Dashain

and Tihar. "It's like landing between Thanksgiving and Christmas," Fisher says.

They'll be there for the first few days of the Tihar festival before they head to Kathmandu and transition into the Everest trek.

"I'm actually really excited for Everest," Maia Mendelsohn says. "This time last year, I didn't even know this trip was going to be a thing and here I am now thinking, 'Oh my gosh, I'm going to go see Everest and climb Everest.' It's crazy."

They'll stay there overnight, and Fisher says, "The best part is you get to pop up to this incredible view of the Everest sanctuary." They'll then descend back into Lukla for a couple days and return to Kathmandu for some sightseeing.

They hope to finish out their trip with a visit to the U.S. Embassy and a meeting with the United States ambassador to Nepal to learn more about U.S. aid efforts and western influences in Nepal for their diplomacy project.

When the group returns Nov. 11, they'll begin assembling the information and experiences they gathered to share with fellow classmates and guests.

"We'll do a final presentation of our experience and learning in December," Ed Mendelsohn says. The school holds an event called "Confluence" at the end of each semester where students present their projects.

"I think I really underestimated the kids' passion for wanting to be involved in something that is so authentic," Fisher jokes, "but that's what I get for thinking."

The students have raised \$1,103 on GoFundMe for their trip, with a goal of \$5,000. To donate, visit gofundme.com/wnxns7f7. ■