



SEPTEMBER 2006
SAUSALITO, CALIFORNIA

Dear Friends,

This will be my last communication from California this year – I am off to Nepal next month and won't return until the spring. As always, I will keep in touch with news about our work, our kids and the ever-fascinating facets of life in Kathmandu.

Before I leave I want to tell you about a new NYOF project that is close to my heart and is one of the most exciting among all our terrific programs. We are going to provide an excellent college and professional education to 20 young girls who are from the most disadvantaged and oppressed community in Nepal. We call it the "Empowering Dalit Girls" program.

The word "Dalit" denotes someone of the untouchable caste. Despite the fact that it is illegal in Nepal to discriminate on the basis of caste, the five million Nepalese people who are born into these occupation-based communities suffer the most degrading and inhumane treatment imaginable. This is especially true of women and girls. Seventy percent live below the poverty line, and the child and maternal mortality rates are very high. The life expectancy of Dalits is far lower than that of the general population. They have been suffering under these terrible conditions for hundreds of years.

The only way those born into this community can hope to avoid a life of humiliation and grinding poverty is by acquiring an education, which will lead to gainful and meaningful employment. And that is the purpose of this project. This summer, our staff fanned out to various remote areas of Nepal to interview young Dalit girls who did well on their college entrance examinations. It is an impressive achievement for a Dalit girl to even qualify to take the college entrance examination, let alone score well. Rather, most Dalit children start work at an early age (it is estimated that 60% of a Dalit family's income is generated by children under 12), and a large percentage of girls are married before they are 16.



"I may be a Dalit, but I'm a future doctor"



"I want to get an education and help my people"

The stories of deprivation and discrimination that our staff heard during the interviews with these 16 and 17 year old girls would knock your socks off. Many of them spoke about the humiliation they suffered at the hands of teachers and fellow students. Despite this oppression, their goals are to be doctors, social workers, chartered accountants, and nurses. Each and every one of them expressed a passionate determination to wipe out the system of caste discrimination in their country.

Of the many dozens of girls interviewed, we chose 20 on the basis of their academic achievement, their overall goals, their personal qualities, and our estimation of the likelihood that they will succeed in college in Nepal's biggest city.

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Earlier this month, we brought them to Kathmandu and enrolled them in excellent colleges. Our commitment is not only to support them through college but to provide them with leadership and communications training as well. We hope that many of them will eventually enter professional schools. In fact, the Nepal government has a set-aside program for students of these castes in professional schools, but there are not enough Dalit youngsters presently to qualify for these spots.

During their entire time in Kathmandu, we will work closely with the young women to reinforce their sense of responsibility toward the Dalit community from which they came. We will encourage them to return to their villages during school holidays so that they do not lose touch with the plight of those they left behind. We have made a five year commitment to the education of these promising youngsters, and with your help we will be able to meet this responsibility.

Please join us in this effort. Your donation will benefit not only the bright young women in this program, but ultimately a far larger community – the millions of Dalits in Nepal who suffer under the cruel system of untouchability into which they are born and from which few can emerge without the assistance of organizations like NYOF.

Warm regards,

The Nepalese Youth Opportunity Foundation

3030 Bridgeway Suite 123
Sausalito California 94965
415 331 8585 info@nyof.org
www.nyof.org

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