

in the higher grades walk at least three hours a day to and from school, and some students have to walk eight hours – four hours each way. These journeys are not leisurely strolls along established roads. The students walk through dense forests, along steep, rugged trails, up and down, up and down. They have to ford rivers and cross “bridges,” which in rural Nepal often means a single log over a raging river. The journey is especially dangerous during the monsoon season, when the rivers are very high. The girls are especially frightened by



To get to the Gaurishankar school, students must walk up to eight hours over dangerous terrain

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this twice daily ordeal. Can you imagine walking home for four hours from school over such terrain, perhaps in the pouring rain, reaching home around 8 pm, to a hut without electricity or running water, and doing your homework before you go to bed, only to get up at 5 am to start the trek all over again? The dropout rate, especially among girls, is understandably high.

High school ends at grade 10 in Nepal. The students at the Gaurishankar school in the 9th and 10th grades are under intense pressure because at the end of 10th grade they must pass the difficult School Leaving Certificate Exam (SLC – sometimes called “the iron gate”) in order to continue their education. This very competitive examination requires intense coaching and study, almost impossible for those who have to walk long distances to school every day.

Som Paneru, NYF's immensely able Executive Director in Nepal, visited the area and spoke with the students, parents and teachers about the needs of the school. They all agreed that what is needed most are two hostels – one for boys and one for girls, each with a 24 bed capacity. This would enable the 9th and 10th grade



A villager donated this scenic hilltop for our new student housing project

students who have to walk the farthest to concentrate on their preparations for the SLC. There is no room on the school grounds for the building, but a public-minded villager immediately offered to donate a beautiful piece of land across the road from the school, and the parents offered to donate their labor for the construction. The community will contribute 30% of the cost of construction in labor. **With your help, we can do more to better the lives of students in remote areas of Nepal by improving the infrastructure of the schools they attend.**

How You Can Help

The crucial ingredient in our success is you, our donors, who have contributed not only money, but have provided advice and encouragement as well. Many of you have told your friends and family about our work, which has been immensely valuable. None of these good works would have been possible without your support. We know your contributions have come from the heart as well as the pocketbook. These success stories are your success stories, too. And, as you know, NYF uses your donations with great care. For the fourth year in a row, we have been granted a four-star rating – the highest – by Charity Navigator, the biggest charity rating organization in the U.S., for our efficient use of the contributions made to us. I know times are tough, but whatever you can give will help. **We are an organization and a cause you can be proud to support. Won't you join us in our efforts by making a donation now? We will be very thankful for your help.**



Warm regards,

Please visit our website www.NepalYouthFoundation.org

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Keeping Olga's Promise

NOVEMBER 2010

DEAR FRIENDS

As usual, you will be receiving this letter around Thanksgiving – a holiday celebrated by Americans wherever we may find ourselves, even in wild and woolly Kathmandu. Sometimes the holiday celebration here gets a bit weird. The trick is to be invited for Thanksgiving dinner to the home of an American who has access to the commissary (limited to employees of the American government), because only there can you get a real turkey and all the fixings.



Sunita (front left) is delighted to be reunited with her family after spending years as a bonded servant

In another way, however Nepal is a fitting place to celebrate Thanksgiving on several levels. When you live here, celebrating the holiday is particularly poignant. Each time you venture into the street you see hollow-eyed, malnourished beggar children, perhaps a poor woman squatting on the street with a pitiful pile of vegetables she needs to sell to feed the child sleeping beside her on the sidewalk, the chaotic, polluted, noisy city, with only a few hours of electricity and water a day.

And that's not all. Just to be around them provides more joy than anyone has a right to expect. They remind me daily of the human capacity for courage and endurance. Their high spirits, loving kindness toward one another, and their appreciation for the opportunities they have been given are a constant source of wonder and inspiration. There's a lesson here for all of us.

Thousands of Nepali children have reason to be grateful to NYF as well. Here's why:



Liberated from bonded servitude and free to go to school!

Liberation Spree

This year, we carried out a massive campaign to liberate from bondage thousands of girls who had been more or less sold by their parents to work as indentured servants – for an average of about \$50 a year. In the process, we practically decimated the supply of baby piglets and goats in several rural areas of Nepal.

For those of you who are new to this newsletter, here's a brief explanation of how the supply of piglets and goats is connected to the freeing of children from bonded labor. More than a decade ago, we started a campaign to eradicate the appalling custom in the Tharu ethnic community in rural west Nepal of indenturing children as young as seven to work as servants far from home. These kids spent much of their childhoods living with strangers, sleeping on the floor under the stairs, and eating leftovers, deprived of an education and frequently abused physically and sexually by their employers. One aspect of our effort was to turn the community against the well-entrenched bonding practice by an energetic awareness campaign of street plays, posters, radio broadcasts, marches, and rallies. The

purpose was to educate the community about how their daughters suffered as a result of being sent away from home at a young age to work under slave-like conditions.

Because the families were so poor that they desperately needed the wages earned by their daughters, we provided a piglet or goat as an incentive to any family that would bring their daughter home or agree not to bond her away. They could sell the animal at the end of the year for about the same or more than they received from their daughter's labor. Then we placed the girls in school at our own expense, supporting them through high school.

Although it cost NYF only \$100 to free a girl, provide the piglet or goat and other incentives and educate her for a year, over the long haul the cost of keeping these kids in school was considerable and limited our liberation efforts. Last year, as a result of our persistent lobbying, the Nepal government began paying for the education of the girls who returned from bondage. As a result, we were able to afford the cost of liberating 4000 girls in the first few months of 2010 – hence the shortage of piglets and goats.

To date, the Nepal Youth Foundation has rescued more than 10,000 girls since our campaign began! We are close to eradicating this inhumane practice, but we are not there quite yet. We need to continue our awareness campaign to reinforce the community's opposition to the practice and continue freeing the girls who are still bonded – perhaps a couple of thousand. In addition, because the local, primitive schools are severely overcrowded as a result of the thousands of new girls enrolled, we need to build schoolrooms, train teachers, and provide academic help for some of the girls who are trying to make up for the years they could not attend school. Onward and upward we go!

Read About Our Accomplishments!

The Nepal Youth Foundation's Annual Report is now online! Read about our recent successes at www.NepalYouthFoundation.org/newsletter



NYF builds schools to prevent overcrowded classrooms like this

More Good Works

Here is what I am not going to write about in detail in this letter: our soon-to-be 12 Nutritional Rehabilitation Homes that so far have saved the lives or prevented the stunting of more than 6000 children with severe malnourishment and educated their mothers so that the condition does not recur; the many youngsters we are supporting in school, from kindergarten to medical school; and the progress of the adorable, loving children at our two small homes, J House (for boys) and K House (for girls).

What I am going to tell you about is other NYF projects, some of which you may not know about.

Our Amazing "Untouchable" Caste Girls

Although the caste system is officially abolished in Nepal, its low caste citizens, who constitute about 20% of the population, suffer from the most abhorrent discrimination and exploitation, especially in rural areas, where their mistreatment is pervasive. In Nepali, the word "Dalit" denotes the "untouchable" caste, the lowest in the hierarchy. These are among the most oppressed people anywhere. The statistics are appalling: only 0.3 percent graduate from college; their average life expectancy is 42 years (as opposed to the national average of 55); and their literacy rate is 22% (the national average is 65%). Their average income is far below that of other Nepalis; half the children suffer from malnutrition, and 80% of the children work as child laborers. You get the picture.

Dalit women are especially disadvantaged. Their literacy rate is only 12%. Centuries of discrimination and poverty have damaged their self-esteem, and few of them are involved in decision-making, development, or

leadership roles. They are trapped in an illegal but well-entrenched exploitative system.

For years, NYF has provided scholarships to hundreds of Dalit girls in primary and secondary school, but we were eager to develop young Dalit women as leaders. So in 2006, we decided to do something about it. We created a special scholarship program for 24 academically gifted young Dalit women who had leadership potential, and we promised that we would support them from 11th grade through college. **We call the program Empowering Dalit Daughters (EDD).**



We are teaching these "untouchable" girls to be leaders

The Nepal Youth Foundation's Legacy Circle

We invite you to join NYF's Legacy Circle – a group of donors (myself included) who have remembered NYF in their estate plans. Your bequest will enable us to continue to transform the lives of thousands of children in Nepal. As one donor who included NYF in her estate plan wrote, "I love knowing that I will continue to benefit children long after I am gone." We are an organization with heart and a sense of responsibility for the children we help. Your gift will provide an effective way to assure NYF's financial stability and the continuation of our work. If you would like information about how to go about leaving a bequest to NYF, please call us at (415) 331-8585.

We brought them to Kathmandu from their remote villages and rented a hostel where they could live together because it would otherwise have been difficult to find housing for Dalit youngsters. We placed them in excellent private colleges, provided supplementary instruction in English, computer skills, and public speaking, brought the few successful members of the Dalit community to talk to them, exposed them to the human rights community, and provided other facilities to develop their leadership capabilities.

Most of them have not graduated college yet, but **so far, the results have been spectacular.** Two young women received full scholarships to medical school in a ridiculously competitive environment. Specifically, 3000 students took the exam; 96 were accepted to medical school; and only 45 received scholarships. They will be the first members of their caste to become doctors, and they have vowed to help their communities after graduation. One graduate is working for USAID, others have internships abroad, and one is working in her own village on a project funded by USAID. So far, more than so good.

You could not find more engaging young women anywhere – they are smart, vivacious, beautiful, hard-working, loving, enthusiastic, eager to do well academically and determined to end the scourge of untouchability. The bonds they have formed with one another have to be seen to be believed. It's hard to imagine another country where you could bring together 24 teenagers from the most downtrodden backgrounds, who have barely been able to afford to go to school and been shunned by society all their lives and yet who in a few short months form the strongest, most affectionate and supportive ties with one another. They are sisters.

I was at their hostel when Barsa, one of the girls who won a scholarship, left for medical school. The weeping and wailing, the hugs, the oaths of eternal friendship – well, it's true that teenaged girls may have a tendency to be emotional – but still, a stranger coming on the scene would find it hard to imagine that these young women had not set eyes on one another until a couple of years ago.

Barsa was only 15 years old when she came to Kathmandu to participate in the EDD



Barsa is the first medical student of her caste – male or female!

program. She is the first medical student of her caste, male or female, and wants to be a pediatrician. After graduation, she plans to practice in Janakpur, her home town, where medical services for the poor are hard to come by. She studied very hard for the medical school entrance examination, often sleeping only two or three hours a night, and foregoing a trip home for Desai (the equivalent of staying at school for Christmas). She cried a lot when she first came to Kathmandu because she was so homesick, but she said that now she is not lonesome – the girls are her second family. She told us, "By getting accepted to this program, I feel like the luckiest person in the world. In the EDD program, we can expose all our inner qualities. I'm very proud of being Dalit because I'm in the EDD program because I am Dalit. If I were not Dalit, I would not get these chances." She said she hoped the program could be expanded to support 24,000 Dalit girls instead of 24. If you would like to view the interview with Barsa, please go to www.NepalYouthFoundation.org/newsletter.

A Trek Like No Other – Eight Hours a Day to School and Back!

And now for something completely different, as they used to say on the Monty Python show. Most of Nepal has no roads and no electricity. In the far west, settlements are few and far between, and children must walk very far to attend school. Because the infrastructure of these schools is deplorable, we have started a program to improve their facilities.

Here is just one example: In the Doti District, about 800 kilometers from



Many children must walk for hours to get to school, often crossing dangerous rivers