

## **Volunteering with Gorkha Development Scheme (GDS)**

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### **Introduction**

Just over 30 years ago I visited Nepal with a friend, it was my first experience of travel to a developing country and we were away for a year. We loved Nepal, the people and the mountains, but due to illness we were not able to complete the trek we had planned. My hope though, was one day I would return. It took 30 years, but after much planning I returned this year with my husband, Ian. Our plan was to complete the Annapurna Sanctuary trek together and then for me to spend time volunteering whilst Ian went off trekking again, this time in the Everest region.

After a long search trying to identify a charity I felt was right for me, my original travelling friend found the Gorkha Development Scheme (GDS). GDS works with the local community on projects that are directed by the sister charity the Gorkha District Education and Health Development Scheme. I would be able to live with a homestay family, whilst sharing my professional skills/experience in the local community.

The timing of our visit was dictated by the dates of our Annapurna trek and not necessarily the best time for the schools, as it coincided with the end of the long holiday and the start of the new academic year. However, the local schools were happy to accommodate me and I was more than happy to be as flexible as was necessary and to just “go with the flow”. Ian and I arrived in Gorkha on the 30<sup>th</sup> March and were very warmly welcomed by my homestay family and the Gorkha District Education and Health Development Scheme. After one night with my family we left my large bag of resources and homestay luggage and set off to Pokhara for the start of our Annapurna trek. The trek was an amazing experience, a phenomenal personal challenge for me, and a wonderful way to experience a little of life in the Himalayan villages and tea houses. I now knew I still loved Nepal, still liked dal bhat and was excited to return to Gorkha to start my new adventure!

After the Annapurna trek, my 20 days living and working in Gorkha were busy, incredibly varied and went far too fast.



## Homestay Life

Myself and my husband Ian were enthusiastically welcomed into our homestay by all the Aryal family. This was a first for us all, for them as a homestay host and me as a homestay guest. The initial apprehension and uncertainty for us all quickly vanished as we got to know each other. I was keen to use this opportunity to learn as much as I could about Nepalese life and they were keen to learn about life in the UK and to practice their already (very) good English, which was thankfully far better than my Nepalese.

During my 3 weeks I am confident I gained the most from this fabulous experience.

The family and I shopped together for food, clothes and resources for me to use in the schools; I learnt how to make roti, momos and dal bhat including grinding the lentils. Grandmother "Amma" showed me how to wear a sari and we had Nepalese dance lessons on the rooftop under the stars! Even Ian, a very reluctant dancer joined in on his return to Gorkha at the end of my time! We cooked over an open fire, as well as cooking in the kitchen.

With the family, we discussed the many differences between our homes, culture and family life but agreed that there were also many similarities, in that we both prioritise our families and all strive to do the best for our children. The novelty of washing my clothes the Nepalese way, was a much more sociable experience than throwing them all into the washing machine like I would at home in the UK, and there were certainly no worries about whether they would get dry outside with the heat! However, it wasn't me who collected the water! Observing first-hand how Nepalese women do all this, along with all the other many physical jobs, alongside raising a family and working full time was humbling. I had the chance to attend a baby's first rice feeding ceremony, saw a number of wedding processions and enjoyed many invitations to visit other homes, where I was welcomed, entertained and fed! We in the UK could learn much from Nepalese hospitality and generosity!







My homestay family were incredibly helpful and supportive; Subadhra and her daughter Shrija helped me source the everyday resources I needed for school and helped me make those I could not buy. They ensured I was very well fed and were happy to provide a variety of different food choices, it was not all dal bhat! Sohan, the 15 year old son got up on a Saturday morning at 4.30am to walk with me up to the temple for sunrise!

In return I was pleased to be able to help the family with the beginning of the school term preparations, things like covering all the many text books and copy books in protective film. During the many power cuts at my homestay we shared a variety of card games, children's songs and rhymes. My head torch and power pack battery light proved very useful on the many nights when the power went off!



On Ian's return from his Everest trek he was warmly welcomed back as a family member. Our last day was Mother's Day in Nepal and was an opportunity to celebrate Mothers, eat fabulous food and dance some more. However I don't think it was much of a rest for Subadhra who worked even harder than normal to ensure it was a very special last day together!

We laughed a lot and shed tears when we left. It was the sharing of the ordinary everyday “stuff” that made my first Nepalese homestay time an extraordinary and memorable experience. Both Ian and I feel very privileged to have been able to gain a little insight into life in a very loving Nepalese family and I very much hope we may return one day. Ian was particularly touched by the number of people, both children and adults, who stopped and said hello to me when I walked him around Gorkha prior to my departure. In his words, “in a short time you seem to have made friends with so many people”.



## Volunteering

The aim for my volunteering time was to:-

- **Support the ongoing teacher training to local government schools by sharing ways to make language learning and use of communication more interactive and engaging.**
- **Identify the speech, language and communication needs of the students attending the Class for children with Special Needs and support the teacher with ideas to enhance communication and language use.**
- **Support with the Women's health programme**

My first 2 days were spent with Naomi Cairns, a GDS trustee who was at the end of her volunteering time at the local hospital and had been joined for her last week by her mum and a family friend who had come to visit for the week. The first day was spent at the tailors ordering my new Nepalese Kurtra suit, visiting the Gorkha Museum and one of the schools I would be working at. Due to a national strike planned for the following day, we used our time to decorate the new nursery which was due to open the following week. The teachers identified this was something they would love to do had they resources and time; it was therefore a perfect opportunity for us to be able to respond to.

We spent the evening planning some simple designs and sourcing the materials needed such as paint, brushes, etc. In the morning to start with it was just the 4 of us, but we were soon joined by some of the students living at the school and some of the teachers who were in school – they were all keen to get involved. New design ideas were added and together we got the job done. By the end of the day, we were hot and tired but the very uninspiring new classroom had been turned into a much more inviting early year's environment, one of the children was heard to say “Now my school looks beautiful” - we all agreed this was definitely a day well spent!





Following an evening meeting to plan details for the following days Women's Health Programme I was keen to enjoy my dal bhat and quickly get off to bed!

**Women's Health Programme** - Dressed in our beautiful Nepalese Kurtra suits we helped out at the WHP. It was wonderful to see such a great turn out of different ages, great participation and plenty of opportunity for the women to ask the doctor questions. Important 1:1 time with the doctor was provided at the end and taken up by quite a number. In true Nepalese style the session ended with fabulous food and a dance! The women attending this session will now hopefully be able to support others out in the more rural areas. See the GDS website for more information on this essential work.

**Saturday (Non School Day)** Family Homestay Day and included attending a family cooperative money saving/lending meeting plus food and chance to do the washing and other jobs! As it was Easter Saturday back home, it seemed a good time for me to share some chocolate inspired baking ideas, so myself and Shrija made Chocolate Crispie cakes which proved to be very popular!

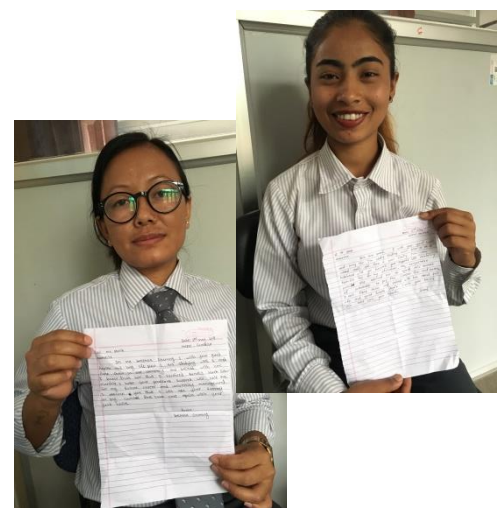


The evening was spent together with Naomi and friends at Laxman's house (the Vice Chair of GDEHDS ) drinking tea whilst discussing Naomi's volunteering experience, making plans for my time and watching the sunset over Gorkha.

**Drabya Shah Multiple Campus (College)** - Collected at 6am by Ramchandra, the GDEHDS Chair and principal of the college for my first motorbike journey! The early start meant that the journey to the college was not as scary as it might have been later on in the day! I enjoyed visiting the college and having the chance to facilitate a conversation class with a group of 19-24 year olds. Initially we were all quite reserved and shy but the session soon became more relaxed and we covered a range of subjects starting with chat about ourselves and interests developing into bigger subjects such as hopes and aspirations for the future, arranged marriages, and the role of women in Nepalese society!



At the end of my stay I returned to the campus to meet some students who are being sponsored via the GDA sponsorship scheme. It was wonderful to chat with them and hear the difference sponsorship has made to them, without it this further education would not be possible. They presented me with letters of thanks to take back to their sponsor.





**Shree Bal Mandir School (2 days )-** A new school year assembly at Shree Bal Mandir School and the opening of the painted new Nursery Class . The pictures were a great talking point and helped to settle some tearful little ones!



This was my first insight into life in a Gorkha District Government funded school. It had been 4 years since the 2015 devastating earthquake and much progress has been made, however evidence of the damage caused to schools was still very obvious and much work remained in progress. Resources in the nursery included a carpeted floor and mats, plus some large suitcases of toys. These included a quantity of different sorts of bricks, inset puzzles, along with a drum and some rather old puppets.

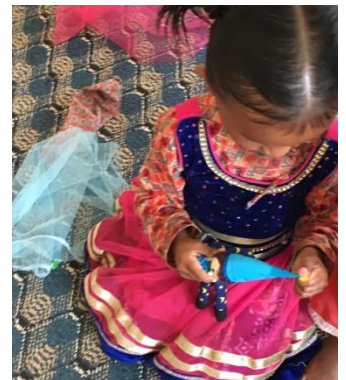
Some of the children settled quickly and enjoyed building with the bricks with some very imaginative play. However a number were very tearful and I was very pleased that I had brought with me some of my favourite interactive resources I use back in the UK such as bubbles, boxes, balls and voile scarves, along with props to support understanding of the language used in songs and rhymes.

In the UK I use these everyday resources to support the Tots on Tour “Growing Talk” early language and communication programme designed to engage and support all children to become confident, expressive communicators. ‘Mikey’ our Tots on Tour cone pop up puppet was developed to be a ‘Talking Listening Partner’ and proved very popular in Gorkha, not just in the nursery class, but even with Class 7 and Class 8! With the younger children he helped me to build relationships and we were able to play interactive games like Peek a Boo. As a result we giggled together, laughed a lot, and the tears soon vanished.

Mikey (my puppet) helped run an English language activity for Class 7! He helped with introductions and together we all played a Hiding Game. This was accompanied by a song supporting the use of ‘Wh’ Questions and prepositions “Where oh where, oh where is Mikey?”



I was able to demonstrate how these simple resources could be used to support interactive teaching, early communication and language learning in both Nepalese and English.



**Shree Shakti School Day (2 days)** - My first day at Shree Shakti School was also the first day for the new nursery/pre-school class which was being provided in one of the older buildings that before the earth quake had been used as offices. The room was situated on the second floor and had access to toilets and an outside balcony. As at the previous school, there was just one member of staff and many tearful distressed children. The resources available were sparse and included a large battered cardboard box of dusty items that had been donated post-earthquake. Again the majority of these were bricks and inset puzzles with just a very small number of books. None of these were able to help the tears and the teacher had to work very hard to engage and comfort the children. Once more our 'Mikey' puppet, bubbles and scarves helped us start to establish some relationships and to have fun together!

Aside from the lack of resources and books, my concern at this school was health and safety issues. I was very aware health and safety in Nepal is quite different to the UK but that said, the combination of lively, active, physically able pre-school children and a second floor building with a balcony with very wide bars, plus windows with no bars, worried me greatly. I felt it was an accident waiting to



happen. Discussion with both the teacher and members of the charity reassured me that this was something to be discussed with the school management team. This was done and by the end of my time in Gorkha the balcony had been altered and made much safer.

The second day at this school was the inauguration and formal opening of the 16 reconstructed classrooms funded by The Lions club. It was held on the 4th anniversary of the earthquake and as such was a very poignant and special celebration. The school playground was transformed and sparkled with banners, bunting, gazeebos, along with a stage. A new slide and swing had also been delivered and was joyfully and creatively used and shared by many children!!



The opening ceremony was attended by many dignitaries, including the International Chair of the Lions Club, the Mayor and local politicians. There was fabulous traditional music, the children were all involved, and the students who were members of the very active Nepalese Scout association helped with the hospitality. The local monkey who gate crashed the stage wasn't on the guest list, but did cause much laughter! The day ended with a meal for the staff to enjoy together. I imagine it must have felt like an incredible achievement, in just 4 years so much had happened. I felt very honoured to be able to be part of this incredible celebration of local and international team work.

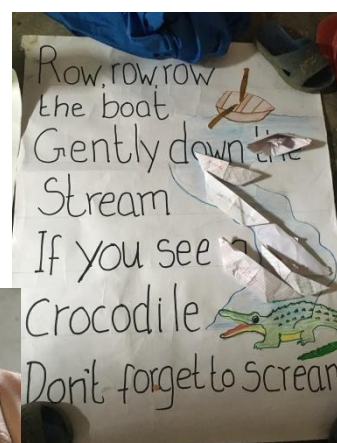
## **Mahendra Joti School - Supporting in Class 1, Class 2 and the Special Needs Unit (7 days)**

As with the previous schools, the plan here was to use my time to support ongoing Teacher Training for teachers working with children from 3 to 7 years of age (Class 1 and Class 2) and also spend time with the special needs class.

The resources and activities I shared were similar to those in the other schools but differentiated for larger groups and slightly older children with a little more structure.

The activities supported turn taking within a large group, listening, paying attention, the understanding and use of new vocabulary, including early mathematical language such as positional concepts, numbers and counting. Rhymes and Nursery rhymes further enhanced the learning. Where possible the activities encouraged the children to be active and creative with the resources.

Some of my favourites included the fun we had with Mikey and his topi (hat), simple Stop/Go activities, and the 'Row the Boat' song which as always worked brilliantly with the lycra (a little like a parachute but stretchy). I was thrilled when the next day many of the children proudly showed me the paper boats they had made at home.



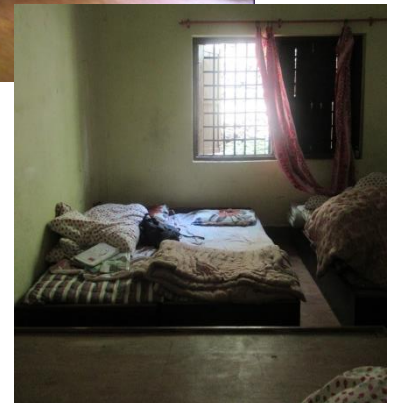
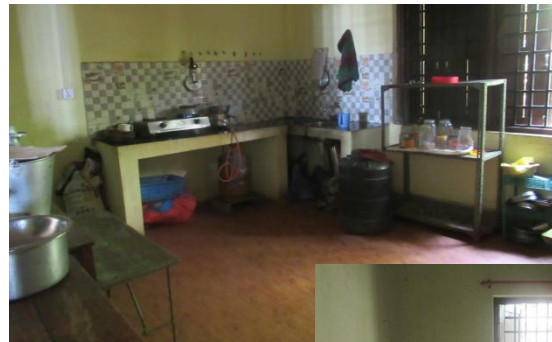
During my time at Mahendra Joti school I met with some more sponsored students and was delighted to collect more letters of thanks and hear just how much sponsorship had helped them attend school providing shoes, uniform, books, rucksacs and geometry sets. Many of the students who attend this school come from very poor rural villages where families would struggle greatly to be able to provide the basic resources they need to attend school.



## Supporting in the Special Needs class

The students attending this class varied greatly in age and ability (6 years to 17 years) some of the children have attended for a number of years and others are new to the class. A couple of the students attend classes in the main school and return to the unit at the end of each day. All the students are included in whole school assemblies and other whole school activities such as playtimes. I understand the long term plan is to be able to offer places to more children and as such there were new faces most days as children were brought to visit.

Facilities have been developed and improved over the last couple of years. The unit is now a self-contained building with a room used either as a classroom or playroom, 2 small dormitories, two bathrooms, plus a kitchen/dining room. It is staffed by a teacher and two assistants/nurses. The assistants live with the children and are responsible for cooking, cleaning and care of the children.



The teacher in the class had limited English but was able to communicate she would like some training and guidance to help her know how to support/teach the children, especially for two young brothers who do not speak. She showed me the resources she had and we both acknowledged a greater variety of resources would be helpful. We also discussed the need to increase the use of nonverbal communication, including some basic gestures/signs. I suggested we introduced some Makaton gestures and explained this would be useful for all the students attending the unit. We also discussed the need to use everyday resources and create more opportunities for students to use their communication (non-verbal or verbal) during everyday situations.

I used my time to try and establish and build a relationship with the boys and informally assess how they were communicating their basic needs, use of social communication, and level of understanding. With the invaluable help of English speaking Bipani (ex-sponsored student working as a teaching volunteer) we managed to gain some insight into their different communication abilities.

All the staff were really excited and surprised to see the ways the brothers and all the students responded to the resources. The brothers both demonstrated excitement and pleasure and gradually started to use their non-verbal communication to express their emotions, to greet, to ask for more and to show what they wanted or didn't want. They initially were seen to be communicating with just eye gaze but later by pointing, and even squealing and laughing out loud! Some basic vocalisations were heard and the youngest brother learnt how to use and blow the bubbles. Gradually they started to share resources with others and were prepared to wait and take turns. The picture below shows the children waiting to have a piece of fruit and pointing to choose whether they wanted 'banana or apple'. Working with all the students in the unit was incredibly rewarding but especially the two brothers, it was very hard to leave ☺.



During the time I was there, together with the teacher and Bipani, we created a wish list of resources useful for the students to have in the unit. I left all the resources I had brought with me including those I had sourced locally and explained we would discuss their identified needs further with the head teacher and GDS.





## Teacher training workshop

May 1<sup>st</sup> (Labour Day Public Holiday), schools were closed but it was decided we could use this day to provide a workshop for the schools/teachers I had been working with. It was short notice for staff but due to the limited time I was spending in Gorkha it seemed the best day to do it. Not only did many of the teachers attend, but two additional teachers joined us from a rural school walking 2 hours to get there! I demonstrated the many ways the resources I had shared in schools could be used with different ages and for different purposes. We discussed why I had used them and the potential learning outcomes for the children. The teachers who had worked with me were able to share how the children had responded to them. Each school was then given a pack of the same resources and a homemade photo book of the activities I had shared at their schools. Unfortunately the teacher from the Special Needs Class could not attend.



Facilitating training and workshops is what I do back home in the UK, but this was definitely one of the most enjoyable workshops I have provided. It challenged me in many ways; I had to think creatively about the practicalities, including the language barriers, the resources we would use, and how to transport them to the school. I need not have worried, in true Nepalese style it all came together, everyone helped and even with my lack of Nepalese it was fun to do and everyone joined in enthusiastically. However, for me, the best thing was when I revisited the schools to say “Goodbye” and saw the teachers enthusiastically using and wanting to use the resources we had shared! Absolutely fabulous.....





Since returning to the UK I have been thrilled to receive pictures of the children using the new resources with their teachers. Clearly a lot more practical resources and support are needed, along with further input from education and health professionals like speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists, but definite progress is being made. I have reflected on the opportunities the children of Gorkha have that many children in the UK do not have, such as independent free play outdoors opportunities outside of school to be creative and to use their imaginations and endless opportunities for physical activities. It was interesting to observe technology which has very much arrived, even in rural Nepal, and many young children have access to phones and social media which will no doubt accelerate at a fast rate. I hope they are used with care and others can share with them the advantages and the disadvantages of technology!

I really hope I have the chance to return to Gorkha but in the meantime social media is allowing me to stay in touch with some very special people!

Thank you to everyone who made this amazing experience possible ☺ ☺ ☺

