

When Family Calls, *We Come Running*

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Photos by Evelyn Wong

A TEAM from Project Khoj Ma, an overseas community involvement project, headed for its second trip to Kathmandu (since its establishment in December 2013) with a group consisting of one nursing and 12 medical students, as well as two doctors (pictured below). We stayed in the outskirts of the Nepali capital from 18 to 31 December 2014, and had the good fortune to work with four beneficiaries, all of whom served marginalised facets of society.





Handicapped residents with Team Khoj Ma at the prayer tower

Kathmandu Christian Prayer Tower

Upon arrival at Tribhuvan International Airport, we travelled by car and van to Chalnakhel village an hour away. We stayed at a prayer tower that provided a 24/7 prayer service for anyone in the village. This tower comprised a sheltered home for the handicapped and is looked after by Pastor Narayan and his family. They have taken in people from all over the country who have been abandoned by their families, due to reasons of finance, social discrimination, and overwhelming medical care.

These residents make their living by performing household chores like cooking, building and farming to keep the place running. During our stay, we forged friendships and enjoyed Christmas celebrations with them, and they soon took us in as their own. They comprised a segregated part of society but remained individuals with hopes and dreams. We might not have provided medical services and medicines, but I believe the provision of affection and friendship brought more comfort than any physical entity would. Sometimes we are endowed with more riches or talents in life, by sheer luck, and we can do anything with them. However, I realised that our talents would only acquire their full meaning when they are used to better the lives of others.

New Hope Ministries

I've never met a more charismatic group of adults than the leaders of New Hope Ministries. We've all come across mentors who have inspired us in one way or another. Here were two couples, Paul and Ruth Thapa alongside Shiva and Rina Shrestha, who have sacrificed their careers and dedicated their lives to a group of children that they had no initial relation to. The ministry has two arms, New Hope Girls' Home and New Hope Hospice.

New Hope Girls' Home shelters girls around the age of ten who were saved from becoming victims of the sex trade. Other volunteers of the ministry also invested efforts in monitoring key border points between India and Nepal that are frequently used by traffickers. About 10,000 to 15,000 girls are trafficked across the border annually, and many of them are vulnerable village girls who were tricked into leaving for a "better" life with strangers who had spent time befriending their families. Furthermore, Indian and Nepalese citizens do not require official documents to cross the border, thus accentuating the problem. The home takes in such homeless girls and provides them with a family and a decent life through education.

New Hope Hospice was originally the house of one of the couples. They have since opened up their home to HIV-positive women who have travelled to hospitals in Kathmandu for treatment. Some hospitals send these females to the hospice for step-down care before they are fit to return home.

The leaders of the ministry have envisioned building a New Hope Village where they could house close to 50 HIV-positive women and more trafficked children. They have acquired a plot of land, and with the help of Team Khoj Ma, have begun digging works on the land. We also spent days clearing weeds and digging trenches, while establishing friendships with the children at the same time. It was my second year volunteering with this ministry. This time, I could sense the stark uplift in the mood and liveliness of the New Hope girls and their leaders, who all had a newfound faith in their eyes. I've seen what our friendships, bonds and affection can potentially do to better someone, but it's difficult to comprehend this statement unless one experiences the journey personally.



Clockwise from top left
 Team Khoj Ma, standing in the shadows of the setting sun, after digging laboriously throughout the day
 Third year medical students, Darren Choo and Deanna Ng educating the younger children at BabyLife
 Painting the walls together with the children at NKP

Baby Life Home and Nava Kiran Plus (NKP)

Both these beneficiaries take in HIV-positive Nepali boys and girls who have been orphaned for various reasons. At Baby Life Home, teachers are brought in to teach the children of varying grades; while at NKP, there are sufficient funds to send the individual children to local public schools. The needs of the two institutions are therefore different.

At Baby Life Home, we taught lessons on science, maths, geography, art and dance, depending on how senior or junior the children were. At NKP, we planned a more interactive session of painting and drawing on the walls of the rooms, as well as interacted with the children, adopting roles of older brothers and sisters in their lives. Sometimes it was hard to put ourselves in their shoes, because we couldn't comprehend the pains and rejections they had faced from their society. I would say that each person I met had been through more hardships than I had at their age, and if I were in their place, it would be highly unlikely that I would be where I am today. That thought kills me.

Prior to the trip, we had raised funds in Singapore for distribution among the four beneficiaries. Although it might make more sense to save on flight tickets and simply send the money over, I believe there is a fundamental benefit and

value in "putting a face" behind the donation, allowing the recipient to see your willingness to be there for them. The emotional utility provided by a team of 15 members being in Nepal cannot be replaced by 15 cheques' worth of donations.

Many of us may have experienced bereavement or a moment of complete despair in our lives, and like these ministries and homes in Nepal, we have or are constantly fighting to stay afloat. It's the reason for what we do that provides us strength, and it is in the middle of these people, that I regained some understanding of my purpose in the medical profession. On this trip, the team may not have built physical entities such as toilets and houses or provided many tangible supplies, but sometimes, the cure, treatment and comfort lie more in the world of intangibles. ■

For more information on Project Khoj Ma or other projects planned under its parent organisation, Seeds of Nations Ltd, please feel free to check out their website: <http://www.son.com.sg>.



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