

# LEAVING A PIECE OF YOUR HEART IN NEPAL



Mixing travel with volunteering and helping those in need.

BY DONNA LAWRENCE

It won't be the first time this happens! A small group of travelers from around the globe heads off on a trek into the Everest region of Nepal. As expected, they're captivated by the sheer beauty and scale of the Himalayan mountain range. More unexpectedly though, when it's time to leave the Himalayas, they find their hearts are permanently marked by the Sherpa people who call this beautiful place their home. And that's how this story begins.

But first, let's set the scene. In

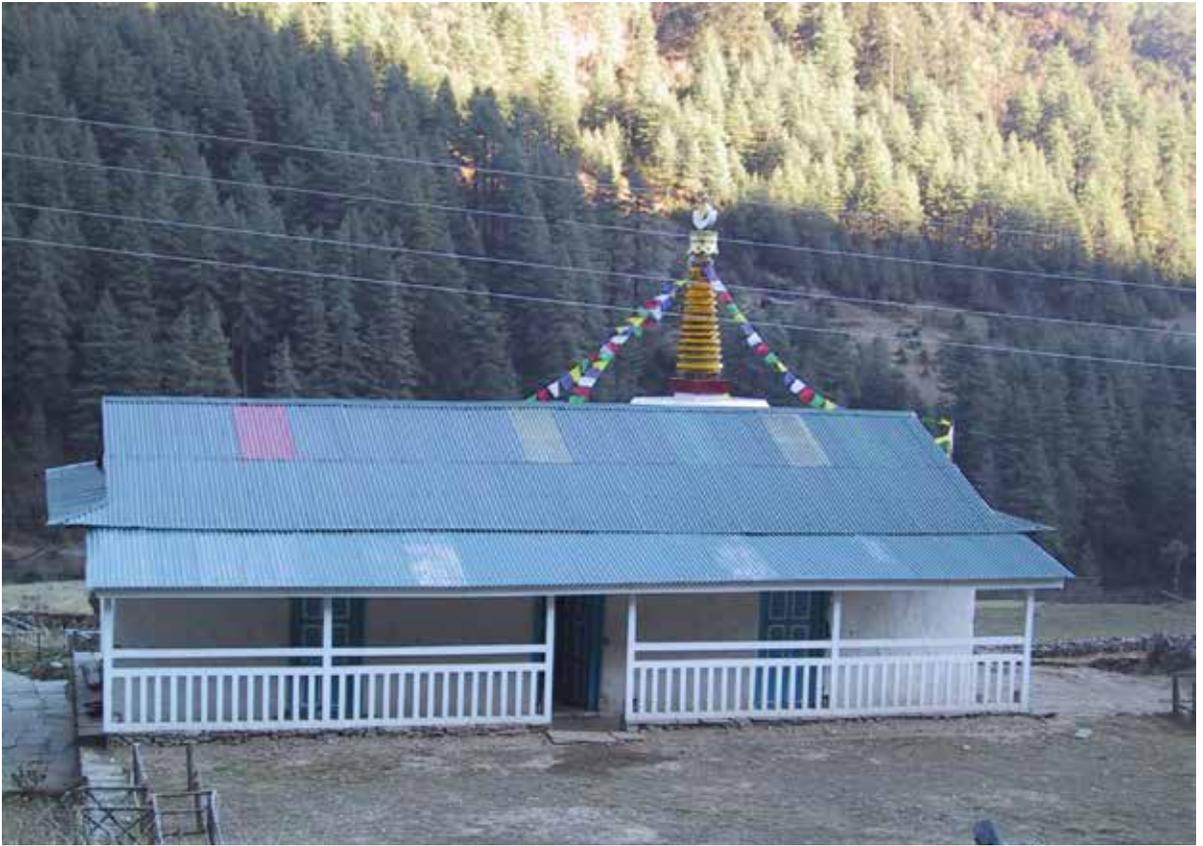
2005, the beautiful Sherpa village of Junbesi, in the Solukhumbu area of northeast Nepal, and its surrounding area had a population of around 3,300. At the time, there was no medical facility nearby for its residents. To provide this vital service to the surrounding rural community, the locals built Kushudebu Public Health Mission (KPHM) – with monies they raised themselves and no help from the Government. Prior to this health mission, villagers, including pregnant women and accident victims, were forced to walk or be

carried for five hours to the nearest town of Salleri.

The main objectives of KPHM are to improve the health of the orphaned and the disadvantaged in the surrounding remote villages, and promote a better understanding of good health practices in order to reduce the rate of premature and preventable deaths.

## THE FATEFUL MEETING

In October 2008, a small group of



## A FAMILY GOES THE DISTANCE

For the family of an Olympic gold medalist and her coach husband, it is not about where or how far you go, but what you experience.

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people met on a World Expeditions Community Project Travel trip called the KPHM Project. They were led by one of World Expeditions' long-serving guides, Ang Tshering Sherpa. Ang and his family call the village of Junbesi home. That is why sustaining KPHM is important to him.

The travellers trekked into Junbesi and spent three days renovating the health mission, repairing and

replacing windows, and painting and building verandahs around the building. When the project was completed, the group trekked out of Junbesi, vowing that they would continue to assist Ang in this project.

From this pledge was born the Friends of Junbesi, an informal online support group comprised mainly of ex-trekkers who met Ang while trekking in Nepal and Tibet

with World Expeditions. The group provides financial and logistics support for Ang and his charitable trust, KPHM. There is an ad-hoc committee of five volunteers, from Perth, Sydney, Canberra, Auckland and the UK, as well as the 500 or so 'Friends.' An online newsletter updates them three times a year.

Local bank accounts for donations have been set up in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Over the last

For 52-year-old Australian Debbie Flintoff-King, winning gold in the 1988 Summer Olympics for the 400m hurdles – as well as a few more golds in the Commonwealth Games and a silver in the World Championships – was really just the start of her life's adventure. Now retired, she spends months traveling with her husband, Phil, and their three children. Not so much to see the sights, but to experience all that the world has to offer and to explore what they can give back in return.

Recently, the family traveled to Tanzania on a trip organized by adventure company, World Expeditions (WE). They had asked WE to arrange a three-week itinerary in Tanzania that specifically

gave them the opportunity to engage with the local people. Consequently the family spent a week in the Masai village of Kakoi, located near the Tarangire National Park, where they discovered how the locals lived and helped carry out day-to-day duties, such as tending to the animals and fetching water, as well as spending time with the children at the school, and learning about how the local women brought revenue to the village by producing and selling beaded products to tourists.

When the family left the village to continue their extended adventure, they found that they had been profoundly affected by their time there. As a result, they made it their personal goal to help the village in

the future. WE had a chance to talk to Flintoff-King about her family's adventures:

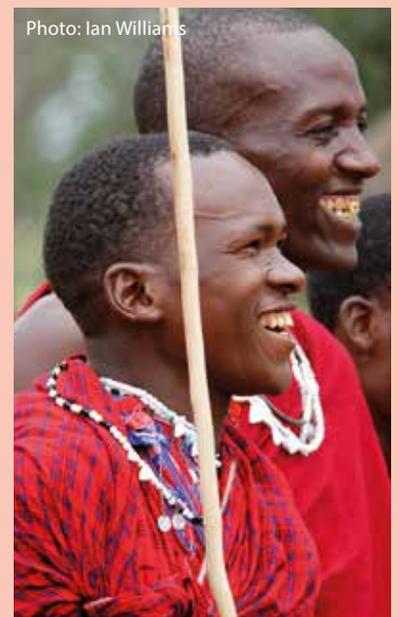


Photo: Ian Williams



four years, the response from donors has been very positive, with over US\$68,000 raised. Some choose to make a regular monthly donation, while others prefer to give funds for special requests, such as financing baby equipment or assisting in training scholarships for staff. All monies received are remitted to Ang on a regular basis with bank charges being the only deductions. An offshoot of Friends of Junbesi, a company called Craft Nepal in New Zealand raises funds by importing Nepalese products and selling them online and at private functions. All funds are sent back directly to the medical center.

Funds received in the last four years have been directed towards a number of major projects, such as the construction of a restroom and shower at the medical center for the resident staff, a waiting room for patients, as well as a delivery room to aid the safe

### What type of travel do you and your family usually do?

We try to create 'experiences' on our trips rather than just sightseeing, and we try to engage ourselves with the local people wherever we can.

### Currently, you are on an extended adventure with your family. Where have you traveled?

We started off in Tanzania, then Egypt, Turkey, Sicily, Monte Carlo, St Tropez, Mont Blanc, Paris, London, and now we are traveling around America for six weeks. We'll have been away for four-and-a-half months.

### What has been the most memorable part of this

### adventure?

There have been many, but one that stands out in particular was our time in the Masai village of Kakoi in Tanzania. The interaction with the locals in the village is most memorable, especially the schoolchildren. We took many photographs of the children in their classrooms and we intend to send these to them when we arrive home so they can display them in their classrooms. The Masai women also showed us how to make their beaded jewelry.

### How did the community of Kakoi respond to your visit?

Even though we do not speak Swahili, and the Masai do not speak much English, we had a great time

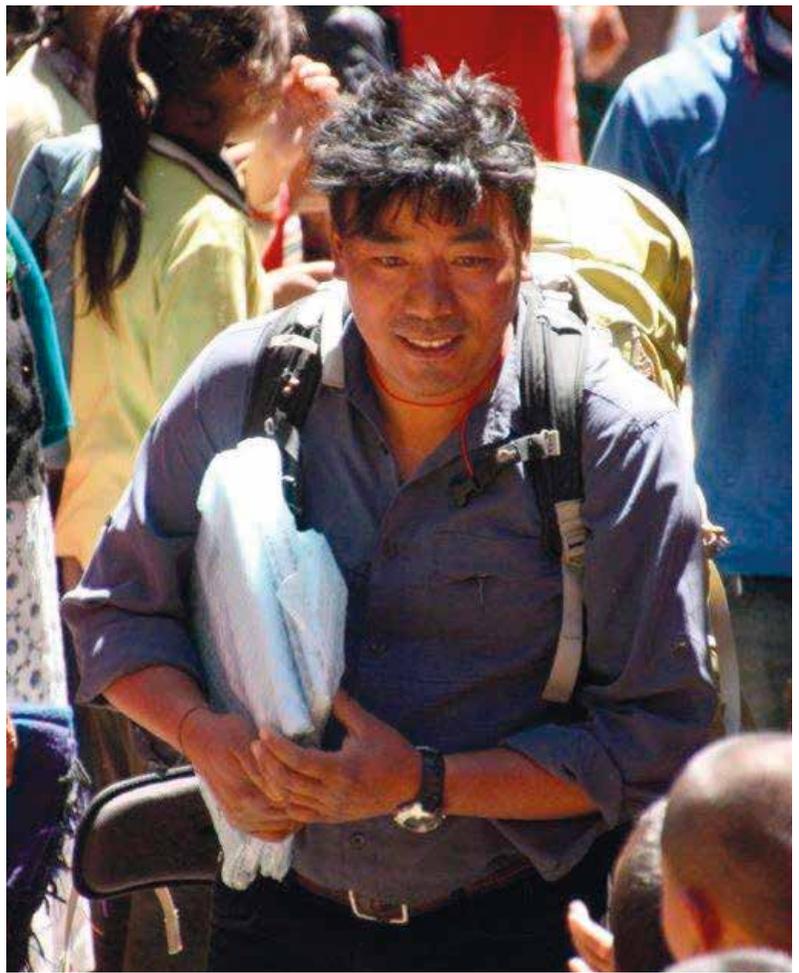
Photo: Ian Williams



delivery of newborns and help lower the maternal death rate in the village and outlying areas. Additional medical equipment and machinery (an X-ray machine, an autoclave machine for sterilization of equipment, and a microscope for pathology work) have been purchased for the facility. The wages of medical staff are also funded via these donations.

### MANY HELPING HANDS

Following the success of the first project, other groups of World Expeditions travelers returned to Junbesi in subsequent years. They installed solar panels, built a toilet and washbasin for the center and constructed more suitable living quarters for the staff - enabling the health mission to operate as a 24-hour service. Previously, the staff had stayed in the building of the clinic, but with their transfer, this spaced could now be used



and found the village people to be warm, happy, friendly people. Their hospitality was overwhelming. They welcomed us into their homes and they even killed a goat for us for lunch.

**The lack of clean water in Tanzanian villages like Kakoi is a serious issue. You saw this firsthand. Can you tell us more about how this impacts the lives of the local people?**

I knew the Kakoi village had no running water, but it really hit home when I saw a young girl, about seven years old, on her way to school, filling up her empty plastic Coke bottle with water from the local creek that her cows also drank from. You could not see through the water ... and this was to be her drink for the day!

**What impression has the Kakoi community left on your family, in particular your children?**

I am hoping it makes my children appreciate what they already have and how fortunate they are just to have food on the table and clean running water. My oldest daughter is in her second year pursuing a degree in midwifery and nursing, and would like to volunteer for

for consultations and overnight accommodations for patients.

In 2011, World Expeditions organized another two groups of travelers to Junbesi to build waste incinerators at nearby Phongmoche and Takshindu Monasteries. These incinerators were necessary for a number of reasons.

With the introduction of tourism to this region over 30 years ago came plastic and non-biodegradable waste. This presented a real waste management problem for a subsistence lifestyle, where most waste is biodegradable. In the Himalayas where there are no roads, no council waste pick-up, and no education on effective waste management, much of this waste ended up in the environment, especially in the rivers. Rudimentary open incinerator pits had been built in the region, but they ultimately posed a danger to humans and

wildlife. With the new incinerators, however, the Sherpa people could dispose of their waste in a manner that was safe for their community.

**NEXT YEAR**

World Expeditions returns in 2013 to build another waste incinerator, this time at KPHM, to provide a safer, more environment-friendly solution to medical waste disposal. In the current waste pit, medical waste, such as syringes, lie about on the dangerously open ground, where children can easily pick them up. The new incinerator will make medical waste inaccessible to the children and reduce the likelihood of it ending up in the environment.

This new expedition's itinerary begins in Kathmandu on May 16, 2013, with a few days for taking in the many cultural and religious sights before the short internal flight to the Solukhumbu

District, followed by a short trek to the village of Junbesi. Once the waste incinerator project at KPHM is completed, the group will continue to trek into the Everest region to Namche Bazaar and Thyangboche. A highlight of this particular expedition is the special dinner at Thyangboche on May 29 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's ascent of Mount Everest. 

 Donna Lawrence is the responsible travel manager for World Expeditions.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** 

KPHM – [www.kushudebu.org.np](http://www.kushudebu.org.np)

World Expeditions – [www.worldexpeditions.com](http://www.worldexpeditions.com)



three to six months at the Kakoi hospital when she gets her qualifications.

**How was your family moved to aid them in their plight?**

It is easy to help the Kakoi community because they need so much. After spending a lot of time at the local Masai school, we made a commitment to buy textbooks, writing books, pens, pencils, rulers,

chalk, soccer balls, folders and notepads for the students, teachers kits and stationery for the teachers. We went shopping in Arusha (in northern Tanzania) and sent it all back to them.

WE and its travelers are involved in renovating the school and constructing water pipelines to bring clean water to the village. What is your impression of the emerging voluntourism, where travelers give back as part of their travel experience?

This kind of travel is a very rewarding, educational and humbling experience. To be able to see first-hand how people in Africa live, and to have the chance to help them – whilst discovering a new culture at the same time – is

the total travel experience. It makes you want to come back again and again. In return for donating even just a small amount of time and money, you feel an incredible sense of satisfaction. Especially since the little you give goes a long way.

### **What's next on your travels?**

We are not home till late October this year but the entire family plans to go back to Tanzania sometime in June or July next year to assist with the development of the school.



**\*\* WORLD EXPEDITIONS HAS TWO OTHER COMMUNITY PROJECTS SCHEDULED FOR 2013. NO SKILLS ARE REQUIRED, JUST PACK AN OPEN MIND, BE WILLING TO COMMIT TO SOME HARD WORK FOR A FEW DAYS AND BE PREPARED TO LEAVE A SMALL PART OF YOUR HEART BEHIND IN THIS WONDROUS PART OF THE WORLD.**

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