

1/26/08

It is January 26th and I am still in Khandbari. Everything works very slowly here. I was hoping to be in the mountains about five days ago, but things have taken longer than expected. Khandbari is a very large village, I should say town in Eastern Nepal. It is the gateway to Makalu, the 5th highest mountain in the world. This is the location of the Ten Friends Himalayan Teacher Training Center that we are assisting and working to solidify. This is the program that we found through Josh Brody one of the original founders. The program has been struggling with survival since the Maoist conflict and was close to being finished. We are jumpstarting it and assisting with many functional needs along with broadening the program to include multiple caste's and add girls to program from other Himalayan mountain areas. Previously this project was called the Nepal Bhotia Education Center.(NBEC) It focused mainly on the upper Arun valley and all but Sunita are from the famous mountain Bhotia caste. The program's main objectives were to educate girls from the remote Bhotia villages and help them become teachers to return to their home regions. It is very rare to find a local teacher and especially an educated women. The center, or what I sometimes call hostel when referring to the actual home, is located in Khandbari and the fourteen girls are from the upper Sankusavi district, several days walk from Khandbari. We are financially assisting the program and I am going through the specifics of everything they do. From meeting teachers, tutors, administration, to doing projected budget, hostel rules & procedures, health issues, etc. On top of that we will try to establish a new local NGO called Himalayan Teacher Training Center.(HTTC) The NBEC program has expired when funding ran out and the local advocate relocated to another country. We are changing the name to better describe the program on a local and international level. We are holding to most of the original goals and objectives with some additions. Our emphasis is going to be on producing teachers from the mountain areas that will someday return to their region. The HTTC will also focus on the selection process in picking talented students that dream of being a teacher. We are working on a selection process that will be unbiased and select the best candidates for the program from low income mountain areas in with multiple caste's. At this time the hostel has fourteen total residents. It has twelve girls and Dhanjik and Sunita who are the hostel leaders and are finishing their Bachelors. This is an amazing accomplishment. It would be nice if we also had a Teacher Training program for boys from the remote mountain regions, but there are several reason that the program was started with girls. The first is that culturally women have had very few opportunities to have an education. The literacy rate for women in Nepal is low and almost non existent in the mountains. I read that it was less than two percent in the remote areas. Watching the pride that the girls have in their program make me realize the truth in the need to educate women. I also see that many of the educated men want to leave the country or go to Kathmandu. The women dream to go home to educate and help their village. I really believe that assisting this program will have an everlasting effect much larger than the individual girls education.

Khandbari is located in the famous Arun valley which is one of the most fertile valleys and interesting places in the world. There are many different caste's that live in this area and cultural history is very strong. I have seen two different programs with parades and

dances from different castes. It is so difficult to describe this place. I really think the scene from Butch Cassidy where they arrive in Bolivia would be a great representation. It is such a contrasting place. I think it is what visitors saw in Kathmandu thirty years ago. There has only been a road here for about five years. Villagers from all over the region come here to trade and sell on Saturday Market. There are two banks (both guarded with a guy with a double barrel shotgun) and about forty shops selling the same things. Chinese clothing, kitchen items, farming tools, vegetables, and solar panels/cyber cafe. It is a complete contrast of early 1900 and 2009. Khandbari is approximately a two hour walk from the Tumlingtar airport. It is about 3000 ft and the same latitude as Florida. I have been eating fresh bananas and amazing tangerines almost everyday.

Sunita and I arrived on the 16th of Jan. with the plan to leave for mountains in about three days. I started really looking into the Teachers Hostel and realized that it was going to take a lot longer to get things up to par. Basically, the girls are amazing. They just needed a little help with setting up systems. Twelve of the girls are age 17-22. They have been living together in about an 800 S. ft. house from three to nine years. They range from 10th to 12th grade. The leaders of the Hostel are 21 years old and are named Sunita and Dhanjik. They have also been here 9 years and were the original girls selected for the program. They have been managing, paying bills, and trying to survive for the past few years. The building has an immaculate office, a small dining and kitchen, study hall and the dorm room. At first view it is quite a nice little spot. The problems are of course the typical in any small town. The political issues are plenty. The first thing that came to my attention was when we started to review and create a new budget. Jim you would have really had a good laugh. Yes, I was helping create the budget. Sunita and I had lugged a new desk top computer to Khandbari for the girls. Having your own computer and printer in this area is not a small thing. They are very excited to be in touch with the outside world. Together we created the budget and yes, I was giving lessons on excel. Sunita and Dhanjik laugh constantly and think everything is funny. Especially, when I get frustrated with the formulas and start yelling. They have a new list of slang terms. The girls are incredibly frugal and have done an outstanding job. I started to notice a few problems when looking at their budget. They are being worked by some local issues and I need to find them new housing as soon as possible. This is not an easy task, and we have been working on it for about five days with no luck so far. We have also been looking at the structure of the program and what we could do to improve. The girls live with fewest of essentials. They have one knife, a small kerosene stove for fourteen girls, one pot and so on. We have been adding a few items and they are so excited. I can not express their gratitude toward the donors that are helping them stay in this opportunity. We have created a duties schedule, general hostel rules, a hand washing routine and our new budget. It is slow going with the language barrier, but it is really fun to feel that they are so willing to try and improve.

I interviewed all of the girls yesterday and put together a little schedule for their program finish deadlines. I asked each girl if they liked living in the hostel and what was their goal or dream. All of the girls said that this opportunity has allowed them to pass their classes because in the village they do not have enough time to study. They must work all day and they are too tired to do their homework. Also their villages usually only have school through 3rd grade and sometimes 6th. They all dream the same thing. They want to go home to their village and one day be a great teacher. They are a testimony to the

original founders Chunduk and Josh Brody. As Sunita, Dhanjik and I sit in the office each girl would come to the door and knock and say "may I enter". I was surprised at the formality after being here for two weeks and asked Sunita what this was about. She reminded me that last week during Saturday Market (twenty yards away) a couple drunken guys walked over and walked into the hostel. I was really upset that some local people feel comfortable barging into the girl's home. I made a big deal about it and demanded that everyone that enters their hostel must knock and ask to enter. The girls are so respectful that they really try to do the right things.

I have learned so many things in the past few weeks about the program here. The girl's education looks to be really structured and challenging. They study constantly. Most of these girls entered at grade 8 level. They call 8-10 SLC which is the equiv. of our tenth grade. If they pass exams after SLC they may continue to Plus 2 which is 11th and 12th grade. If they finish Plus 2 they can take teachers exam and become a primary teacher, or continue on to a three year Bachelor's program. If they finish bachelors and pass teaching exam they can teach lower secondary, (middle school) or secondary. Since most of the villages are primary only, most of the girls are shooting for Plus 2 primary teaching. Sunita and Dhanjik are both finishing their Bachelors. Sunita has finished course work and Dhanjik will finish this May. Sunita is waiting five months for her exam results.(that's Nepal) Sunita and Dhanjik both want to teach, but also want to keep the (HTTC) program going. I am encouraging them to finish Masters while they are here. That is basically never been done for a mountain girl to get a master's degree. A local teacher told me that less than 25 students from upper mountain region have ever achieved SLC.

I wish you could see what these girls are like. Nepali people are very humble and respectful as a rule. These mountain girls are the extreme to this. When they talk to me it is usually in a whisper with their heads down. Sunita told me that this shyness is the most difficult thing for the girls to overcome when they come out of the mountain. They struggle in classes at the beginning of the program, because of this extreme shyness. They have been raised on a farm high in the Himalaya and Khandbari has been a very big city and a new experience for them. In the evening a math and English tutor come to work with the girls. My first night here Sunita introduced me to both. They pay them an incredible amount of money for this tutoring, so I was excited to meet them. After meeting them, Sunita asked my thoughts. I tried to be respectful, so I told Sunita they seemed really nice. The only little problem is that the English tutor doesn't speak English. Sunita realized the irony and with Dhanjik we laughed so hard we couldn't stand up. Both of them while holding their stomachs and crying from laughter would say "only little problem, English teacher can't speak English." This has carried on for the past two weeks. Any time there is something that doesn't make sense we say "only little problem". I find that it is totally common that the local students write well, but get very little English speaking experience. We have started a little program we call informal English speaking and each night we meet for an hour and practice. It is really fun. The girls laugh constantly and tease me about my poor Nepali. We put in a special push-up rule. If they speak Nepali, they must do one push-up. If I speak English I have to do a push-up. They have never done a push-up and they think it is the funniest thing. We do a lot more push-ups than practicing our language. I look forward to this time every night. I think if we could work out a system for our local teachers at home to get here for a few

weeks it would be amazing. They could use English, technology and health. Those are the things that could dramatically improve their lives.

I set some basic tasks for myself while in this area.

1. Set up accurate budget for the program and figure out how to establish permanent funding. Also start local funding plan to assist with independence of program.
2. Establish communication, (Phone, Computer)
3. Figure out housing situation for safe permanent housing for the facility.
4. Start their process for setting up new local NGO for their future independence.
5. Set system for selection of future mountain students.
6. Confirm rules of hostel and Ten Friends agreement.
7. Set emergency plan for hostel (earthquake, lost girl, intruder, fire, etc.)
9. Create hostel First Aid Kit.

I haven't completed all of these and of course this is the structure is the American approach. I think the biggest thing is that I am here and working and planning with the girls. They are excited about the support and really tell me what to do. The girls are creating a local board and we have made some really interesting relationships doing this. We are trying to re-establish the NGO and make a few changes that the girls would like to see. There is a very well known woman in Khandbari that set her own local NGO for widows. I can't begin to explain the difficulty that widows have in this culture. She is an amazing person and wants to take Sunita and Dhanjik under her wing and help them with setting up their own NGO. She has agreed to be on the board along with three other women and Ratne Shwar a good friend of Josh Brody's and a long time supporter. I think the girls are going to pull it off. In this area to have two 21 yr old women being the chair person's of their own NGO is no small accomplishment. I have set up a phone system called a CDMA, which is a very powerful cell phone that we have a pre-paid card. It is amazing because the girls will be able to call us in the states for seven rup. a minute. This phone will also connect us to the internet and allow e-mail communication. Of course the phone needs a special data cable that is being sent from Kathmandu. That should be here by July. I am kidding, maybe.

This is my usual routine, wake at 3:30 A.M. to hurry to the hotel bathroom. After this time it is so disgusting that I can not make myself go in the bathroom. There are about 16 construction workers staying at hotel with me and the hacking, spitting and missing the toilet starts early. For the first few days I tried to make it to the bathroom when I woke up and once to take a shower. I puked each time. Some local architect built the squat toilet and the shower together. The toilet is about one foot above the shower. By 4:00 A.M. the local workers are up going. (literally) Kolleen and I stayed at this place last year and it took a month to get over the bed bug bites, and I got a terrible chest cold. I now leave early and buy my meals on the street and cook at the hostel. I really hope to find a new house for the girls with a guest room. I did get my Nepal cough back and decided to go to the local doctor since I am getting ready to head toward the mountains and hopefully Kimithanka which is the highest village that sits on the Tibetan border. This will be extremely cold and I thought I should get checked. The doctor is from Kathmandu and was very excited to speak English. He lived in the states for two years. He was explaining to me that he really can't do much other than prescribe some drugs. I bought

150 rupees of a Nepali antibiotic and am going to give it a try. He was telling me that if you have an appendicitis attack here, you will die. It is a different world. He said it is so frustrating because he has the training to do many things, but just not the facility.

Well, I had better be going. I am trying to send this today. This is the second day that the internet has been working since I have been here and I want to try and send this to you before I leave for the mountains. I am really excited to get moving. Sally e-mailed me a few weeks ago and told me that Diane Jacobsen wasn't going to make it. It has been on my mind a lot while I have been working with these young teachers. When I was in college I worked at outdoor school with Diane and she was so good. I looked at Diane and Nellie and I always believed that they were what a teacher should be. I was at Sisters Elementary for one year, Diane was always working so hard for her students. It was her calling. While working with these girls and seeing their excitement to be teachers I have been thinking that Diane would have really enjoyed this place and she is what these girls need to see. I am going to hang a prayer flag for her in this place.

As usual I am just rambling on. Please edit or delete as you see fit. I probably won't be able to be in touch for the next month. Take care and appreciate your toilet.

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