

Paying it forward

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St. Olaf College senior Subhash Ghimire, left, spent six weeks last summer in his native Nepal running a summer camp he founded to benefit war-affected children. (Photo provided)

Building a school in war-torn Nepal is far from many Northfielders' minds.

While American educators are mired in debate over federal and state guidelines, Adequate Yearly Progress and best practices for delivering education, Nepalese students long for indoor plumbing, electricity and books.

With the help of 22-year-old Subhash Ghimire, a St. Olaf College senior from Nepal, his village now has a library. With a little luck and a lot of hard work, the rest will come.

And it appears it just might.

Genesis

A few bucks and a little effort are certain to produce tangibility. A few more dollars and a little more effort are certain to produce something simply sublime.

Enter Ghimire.

Using a \$10,000 grant he received from the Davis Projects for Peace Foundation, Ghimire last year returned to Arupkhari, the remote village where he was born, to open a summer camp. There, he created a library with 1,600 books and two computers, which are run by a generator.

He focuses his efforts there, because as a child, he experienced firsthand the country's civil war between the Nepalese government and Maoist rebels. The 10-year conflict ended in 2006.

The war left many children without parents, including the 42 children who attended Ghimire's Fulbari Summer Camp. Many of those students had lost one or both parents during the war, he said.

And without a proper education, Ghimire says he knows many of the children won't have a chance to better themselves.

As a child, he was selected to study at Budhanilkantha, a prestigious school in Kathmandu, Nepal, a far cry from the school in his village to which he had to walk barefoot and for which he studied by candlelight.

"Very few people get those opportunities," he said, motivating him to pay it forward.

But his efforts don't stop with the summer camp.

"If I could do this with \$10,000, I thought I could do better," Ghimire said.

Sustainability

The camp was just the beginning for the Sarswati Foundation. The nonprofit is planning to break ground on its Sarswati Peace School in August.

The foundation hopes to educate 250 or more war-affected children annually. The efforts will be possible through fundraising, donations and some admission fees.

Ghimire said the plan is to hire local teachers and train them. Also, he expects American teachers will travel there and volunteer for a year. Fees will be assessed based on a family's ability to pay, though about 60 percent of the students are expected to be on scholarships.

A sponsorship program has kicked off — donations of \$80 cover the costs of tuition, books and supplies for one student for an entire year.

To save costs, Ghimire says the school will also use solar power to reduce energy costs and will implement a permaculture system where the school will maintain permanent agriculture by relying on renewable sources and a self-sustaining ecosystem.

Then there's the outpouring of support from others.

In what has to be considered one of the most innovative and daring fundraisers, a woman named Ania Lichota is planning to climb her way to a large contribution for Ghimire's dream.

She's eyeing the final feat of the seven-summit challenge — climbing the highest peak on every continent. The last stop for her is Mount Everest in Nepal. She is planning to raise \$100,000 to donate to the Sarswati Foundation for its Peace School.

Bringing Nepal to Northfield

When she was a senior at St. Olaf College, Erin Carson participated in a global semester, making a stop in Nepal. Her quest for more knowledge of the country has never wavered.

She and her husband, Kyle, are in the process of adopting a Nepalese girl.

Now a social studies teacher in the Lakeville School District, Carson came across Ghimire's name in October when she did an Internet search.

Since then, they have formed a bond that has led to a fundraising event to be held April 29 at The Grand Events Center. All proceeds go to the foundation.

With a soft voice and vulnerability in his tone, Ghimire's stories of his homeland bring those war-ravaged stories to the fore of those who hear them, Carson said.

"I'm always inspired by him," she said.

She's far from the only one.

Nate Jacobi, an associate director of civic engagement for St. Olaf's Center for Experiential Learning, said there's a reason why Ghimire got the Davis grant.

"He had the vision," Jacobi says.

Ghimire's commitment to social justice and improving the quality of life is palpable.

There's a simple reason for that, Jacobi says.

"It's not just a little project to test something out; it's his life."

Moving forward

Since returning to St. Olaf for his senior year, where he will graduate from next month with a political science degree, his work toward bettering Nepal hasn't subsided. He knows educating Nepal's youth is the gateway to improving the country's post-war society.

And that's why nothing in his world has been put on the back-burner. That's what impresses Jacobi most.

"He's a leader," Jacobi said. "It's amazing he's been pulling this off."

In November, he went to the European Summit for Global Transportation to talk about his efforts. Last weekend, he traveled to Miami to participate in former President Bill Clinton's Clinton Global Initiative University, a meeting to discuss solutions to pressing global issues.

For the past two years, he's contributed to the Huffington Post, a news website, as a columnist on south Asian issues and is a regular columnist for My Republica, Nepal's national daily newspaper.

And this summer, Ghimire will spend another six weeks in Europe as a junior fellow for the Humanity in Action program where he will discuss and research human rights issue in the region, to which he hopes to bring that knowledge to Nepal.

Ghimire will spend next year developing the Arupkhari school, before returning to graduate school, likely for diplomacy.

For Jacobi, he'll be sad to see Ghimire leave Northfield, but knows the Nepalese man from a small village is needed elsewhere.

"He's probably one of the most inspiring students I've ever worked with," he said. "It'll be amazing to see where he ends up in a couple years."

— *Corey Butler Jr. covers arts, culture and youth issues. He can be reached at cbutler@northfieldnews.com or 645-1114.*

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Peace School Concert — music, dancing and silent auction

WHERE: The Grand Event Center

WHEN: 6:30 to 10 p.m. April 29

COST: \$15 for adults; \$8 for students

ON THE WEB

For more on the Sarswati Foundation, head to <http://www.sarswatifoundation.org>