

A Trip to Nepal:

A Room to Read experience

A retired principal journeys to Nepal and reports on the progress being made to bring education to the world's most needy children.

by Nancy Campbell

Namaste ... namaste ... namaste ... I repeated over and over as the students festooned us with marigolds and bougainvillea. My friend and I giggled self-consciously on the stage as the 600 students of Shree Mahakali Secondary School in Nepal buried us in flowers. The children in this school are largely from the Dalit caste, or untouchable caste. We were the honoured guests as we represented *Room to Read*, an organization that had built a library in their school. Under a huge banyan tree, we were honoured with flowers, speeches and dances. In the end, we provided some entertainment ourselves as we joined staff and students on stage to dance. Fortunately, there are no photographs of this part of the day!



This school was a typical one in the developing world; classrooms were bleak quadrangles with no windowpanes, no doors, a single blackboard at the front, and jam-packed with rows of children on benches in front of narrow tables. In stark contrast to this was the newly-built library, a separate building with carpet on the floor, bookcases filled with children's books written in Nepalese, bright and colourful pictures and posters on the wall. Clearly this was a special place of learning for these students. This trip took nine hours,

six of them on a terribly rutted, dusty road, in 30-degree weather. It was well worth the time spent; we were delighted to see firsthand the impact of this organization.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world, yet rich in history and incomparable beauty.

Twenty-five years ago, Nepalese were basically living in the middle ages. Now, people are more used to foreigners. They live in well-built stone houses, but few have electrical power so they use indoor fires. As most homes do not have chimneys

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to siphon off the noxious fumes, many people suffer from lung related diseases. Yak and mule trains and human porters carry goods from village to village. The average wage per day is about \$1.

Kathmandu, the capital, is a city of narrow streets and Hindu and Buddhist shrines, sometimes side by side. It is also an assault on the senses. There is a prevailing stench from garbage and animals and a cacophony of car horns and hawkers. Yet, once inured to the chaos, you begin to appreciate the culture of two religions coexisting in relative harmony, and the indomitable spirit of the people, who are always smiling and welcoming.


This visit to the school marked the end of a three-week trip to Nepal and was a highlight for us as we both have been working hard to fundraise for *Room to Read*. *Room to Read*, a non-profit organization founded by John Wood, author of *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World, an entrepreneur's odyssey to educate the world's children*, promotes literacy and gender equality in the developing world. In just more than ten years, John and his team have

had an impact on the lives of more than five million children in Bangladesh, India, Laos, Nepal, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Cambodia and Zambia by establishing 1400 schools, 10,000 libraries and supporting 10,700 girls on long-term scholarships. *Room to Read* has accomplished this in partnership with the local parents, communities and governments. This year, on *Barron's* prestigious list of the top 25 Philanthropic Organizations of the World, *Room To Read* ranked 7th. This was the only organization not built on wealth or fame, or both. John Wood likes to think of *Room to Read* as a movement.

We had the opportunity to meet the country coordinator, a Nepalese, educated as an environmental engineer in the US who realized that, to introduce environmental awareness to children, you needed to make sure they are literate. He explained the literacy program *Room to Read* introduces into selected elementary schools. Teachers receive training about how to execute the programs with such techniques as formative assessment. I was impressed when I heard this as this concept is still be-

ing introduced into our educational system. They also fund regional authors and illustrators to write children's books in the local language, so students have culturally relevant reading material. In most countries, these *Room to Read* stories are the only children's stories available.

One of *Room to Read's* programs is called the Girl's Education Program. *Room to Read* provides scholarships to girls to attend school, particularly those who are at-risk of dropping out. In Nepal, the Kamlari system has indentured their girls, sending them to work at a very young age for other families. *Room to Read* has worked with a local non-governmental organization (NGO) to stop this practice. The local NGO pays the family the money they would earn from being indentured so the girls can return home. *Room to Read* provides them with a scholarship to attend school. Not only do they pay the fees, but also they provide a uniform, health care, a female mentor and life skills' training to ensure these girls will be successful in school.

As educators, we know the power of education to transform lives. Having taught in Nigeria for two years, I am well aware that education is not a universal privilege, especially for girls. 

Nancy Campbell was a principal with the Sea to Sky School District when she retired at the end of the 2009 school year. She can be reached at ncfrenchy@gmail.com.



How to Help: *Room to Read* has begun a school-based project. *Graduate to Graduate* involves graduating classes leaving a legacy of a one-year girl's scholarship (\$250) in the developing world. If you are interested in your grads participating in this program, email me at ncfrenchy@gmail.com. If you are interested in joining our movement, or learning more, please visit <http://www.RoomtoRead.org> or email us locally at vancouver@roomtoread.org.