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Nepal lifeline

Eugene-based group reunites families torn apart by child trafficking



1/4 – Children at Next Generation Nepal's transition center in Nepal.

BY TESS NOVOTNY

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In Kathmandu, Nepal, an estimated 16,000 children are living in abusive, unregistered orphanages that often serve as fronts for child trafficking businesses.

Next Generation Nepal, a Eugene-based nonprofit organization, has been working to reunite these trafficked Nepali children with their parents since 2006.

Anna Howe, executive director of NGN, lived in Nepal for 20 years. While in Nepal, Howe assisted in setting up the infrastructure of the nonprofit, which was founded by Connor Grennan.

Howe's years in Nepal and work with NGN have given her a fluent understanding of the nation's child trafficking crisis.

Child trafficking gained momentum in Nepal during the civil war between the government and rebel groups from 1998 and 2008, Howe said. Both the government and the rebels used child soldiers, forcing families to give up their sons or face death.

Though the war ended, the trafficking business proved so lucrative that it's still going strong, she said.

Traffickers take advantage of uneducated families in desperate situations in visits to the impoverished, secluded villages in war zones where they reside. Traffickers falsely present themselves as sponsors with the mission of taking children away from violence to attend boarding schools in Kathmandu.

Eager to give their children a better life, families jump at the opportunity to send their children to Kathmandu for education and safety. Families also sometimes pay fees that the trafficker claims will go toward the child's care, but end up in traffickers' pockets.

Traffickers take children to Kathmandu, often housing them in filthy, cramped conditions, and put them to work begging for money mostly from travelers and foreigners throughout the city. The kids, physically sick and malnourished, bring money back to the trafficker. They often need to bring a set daily amount to avoid being beaten. Around 80 percent of all children living in Nepali "orphanages" actually have at least one living parent.

"Usually this type of trafficking comes from civil unrest, disaster or poverty," Howe said, noting Nepal is recovering from the war and the 2015 Gorkha earthquake that killed almost 9,000 people as issues that are deeply embedded in the origins of Nepali child trafficking.

Howe described dreadful conditions in some of the "orphanages" NGN relocates children from.

In one, a young girl was beaten by a trafficker and made to sleep on the roof of the building with no blankets because she was hit by a bicycle. She subsequently fell ill, and as punishment for her sickness, was hung upside down on the roof and beaten with thistles by the trafficker, who forced the other children to beat her too. The girl died, and while Howe said this was an extreme case, trafficked children are very likely to be abused.

Luckily, NGN was able to reconnect the rest of the children from that home with their families.

Finding families takes time

NGN's work to reunite children with their families doesn't come in until after the Nepal government has busted and seized children from an abusive "orphanage." At that point, the government releases the children to the care of Next Generation Nepal and the group houses them in a rehabilitation center until their parents are found.

Howe said that since many trafficked children were taken at a young age, have been away from home for years and went through extreme trauma, they no longer remember their names or where they are from.

To find their family, the organization gathers as many clues as they can from conversations with the child and any physical or dialectical traits that are specific to certain regions of the

country. Then, they take a photograph of the child to the area they believe they are from and ask villagers if they know anything about them or their family.

The process of relocation can take anywhere from a few months to a few years. While they wait, children receive counseling, tutoring and medical help. NGN can keep up to 30 children in its care at a time.

In the last 10 years, Next Generation Nepal has managed to reconnect 577 children with their families, permanently reuniting 220 of them with one or both parents. Howe said they screen each child's parents before releasing them, and if the parents are unfit to care for their child, they find a qualified member of their extended family to take them. NGN checks up on them every few months to ensure they are safe.

Sometimes children will stay in the care of NGN after their families have been found in order to get an education because their family's village does not have a school. If the children are teenagers and able to live on their own, they will sometimes do so instead of going back to live with their families.

Howe said that returning children to their families and seeing them thrive again after all of that trauma is truly incredible.

"The whole village is out there waiting, and the children are kind of shy," she said about the reunions. "Everyone's crying and everyone's talking and smiling. It gives me goose bumps because these kids ... they just become happy, joyful kids finally."

There have only been two children whose families they couldn't locate because they had died. In this case, NGN finds an ethical children's home to care for them until they are young adults.

NGN also engages in efforts to educate both Nepalese and Americans about child trafficking and how to prevent it, as well as support 17 "senior youth" who were rescued by NGN and are now pursuing higher education or vocational training in Nepal.

NGN has 22 employees in Nepal, and four staff members at its office in Eugene.

When Howe became executive director in 2012, at founder Grennan's request, it was decided that the organization would move from its previous New York location to Eugene — Howe was interested in Eugene because it is the sister city of Kathmandu.

When Grennan offered her the job, she had only one question:

“I said, ‘Can I go anywhere I want?’ He said yes, and I said ‘I’m going to Eugene!’ ”

Howe oversees all of NGN including finance, communications and weekly reports on how their different programs for rescue, reunification and prevention are going. She said she keeps busy every day with going over all of the details and legalities of their programs.

“It’s 24/7 because we have children’s lives at stake,” she said. “I work in the office like anyone would, an eight hour day, but I get up at 4:30 a.m. and go to bed at 9:30 p.m. so I can answer emails to Nepal and be up before they go home — they’re 13 hours ahead of us.”

Howe said that all of the employees in Nepal are Nepali. “It’s been my personal goal to have all Nepalese working for Nepal to make it a better place,” she said.

Misguided “voluntourism”

Howe wants Westerners to see another crucial, lesser-known layer to the child trafficking crisis. She said that many “orphanages” are fueled by well-intentioned foreigners on “voluntourism” trips to Nepal to volunteer in what they believe are orphanages, but actually are trafficking businesses. Traffickers create realistic websites and brochures that lure foreign volunteers to their houses, Howe said, and are also skilled at keeping the reality of their businesses hidden from volunteers throughout their stay.

“These children have been beaten so badly because if they say they miss their mother to a foreigner, they get beaten,” Howe said about why the children don’t reveal their true identities. “So they have to say they’re orphans to foreigners. The word ‘orphan,’ it tugs at the heart of the foreigner, and innocently they’re fueling child trafficking.”

Howe said that even though it is technically illegal to travel to Nepal to volunteer, thousands of foreigners come every year because the government does not regulate the industry.

Foreign volunteers pose further issues by only staying at the houses for a few weeks, creating attachment issues for the children.

“During the time they’re there, they play, love, laugh, and the child has a sense of family,” Howe said. “Then they’re gone. So (the children) come to us not only being abused severely, but they carry with them abandonment and separation anxiety.”

As people make and finalize their summer plans, Howe has some advice for anyone who may feel the urge to help people in developing countries: Don’t volunteer somewhere un-

less you have a specific skill, such as English or computer work, to pass on.

“It’s not a touristy thing to do, it’s not how to spend your time and it’s not just in children’s homes,” she said. “Unless you have a trained skill, the Nepalese can do everything! And especially with the working in children’s homes, you just can’t possibly know if they’re ethical, if they’re orphans or not.”

Follow Tess on Twitter [@tess_novotny](#) . Email tess.novotny@registerguard.com .

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“They just become happy, joyful kids finally.”

— Anna Howe, Executive director of Next Generation Nepal

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