

Niamh Hunt
Trinity Hall

THA REPORT – VOLUNTEERING IN NEPAL 2011

During the summer of 2011, myself and another student at Trinity Hall, Sukhmani Khatkar, were privileged to be able to spend time in Nepal with some of the happiest, friendliest, and yet most severely ill children in the world. We spent 5 weeks working with these children who are suffering from HIV.

Travelling with a universally recognised organisation undoubtedly reduced the amount of pre-travel stress as we had been told what essentials we needed to bring. Nonetheless, arriving at Kathmandu airport where it was pitch-black at 8pm despite being the beginning of August, barely able to breathe due to the heat and humidity and not having slept for over 24 hours was rather daunting, particularly as we were practically the only 2 females outside the airport.

Nepal is a beautiful country with breathtaking scenery yet it is very underdeveloped. Kathmandu is both extremely poor and extremely polluted; there is poor electricity supply and certainly no water sanitation. Some of the poorest Nepalese live in huts beside the river, where children swim in the filthy river water which contains both rubbish and the ashes of the dead. It is no wonder these children contract so many illnesses. The hustle and bustle of the city was rather overwhelming, particularly as cars, busses, tuk-tuks and cows drive (or walk) at ridiculous speeds all over the road as there are no road markings!



However on meeting our host family our fears were immediately alleviated as they were extremely warm and welcoming.

Niamh Hunt
Trinity Hall



On arrival at MSPN, where we were to spend the next 5 weeks, we were met by Sudha, the manager of the centre and surrounded by friendly, smiling, excited children who immediately wanted to play and to give us constant hugs!



MSPN, short for Manisha Singh Punarjeevan Nivas, is an incredible place. Founded by Manisha Singh, a dedicated social worker who devoted her life to the welfare of people living with HIV, the centre aims to increase awareness of this virus and to improve the health of children who suffer from it. "Punarjeevan" means "New Life" and "Niwas" means "Home" or "Centre." Children up to the age of 10 who have HIV are referred there for a period of approximately 4 months during which time they will be given their own bed as well as food and medical treatment. If the child has a mother or father who is still alive, they are also welcome to stay at the centre and as they are often HIV+ as well they will receive training on their illness and on how to feed their child nutritional meals at minimal cost. However three children at the centre have no parents, either because they have been abandoned or because their parents have died due to AIDS. They are able to remain at the centre only so long as there are funds provided for them to do so.

HIV is prevalent in Nepal, particularly amongst sex workers, addicts and migrants. Yet the subject of this virus is incredibly taboo within the country itself, with children who have the virus being refused entry to school and adults, in particular women, ostracised by the rest of the Nepalese population. This means that the children we were working with were largely illiterate having either been expelled from school or refused admission altogether.

Niamh Hunt
Trinity Hall

There is always something to be done at MSPN and we tended to leave the house just after 8a.m and return home just before dinner. Our role was essentially to be as pro-active as possible and help out wherever we were needed. We were involved in preparing meals, cleaning the centre and preparing medical supplies whilst the children were having their afternoon nap. When they were awake, we taught them as much as possible though their attention span was extremely short and so some basic numeracy and literacy skills was all we were able to manage. However they loved singing and so we taught them a number of nursery rhymes, as well as the card games “Snap!” and “Uno!” which resulted in much competition and hilarity.



We were fortunate to witness ‘Teej’, the festival of women, during our stay and this involved the children dressing up in fantastic costumes and a special meal, as well as gifts for everyone involved, including us! The children were taught a special dance for the occasion which they performed and then everyone, children and adults alike, danced together to traditional Nepalese music. It was both heart-warming and heartbreaking to see the children and their mothers so happy and carefree, as we are unsure how many of them will still be alive this time next year.



Each week a number of children are brought to the hospital, either for a check-up or because they have contracted the flu or another virus or infection from one of the other children. On a number of occasions we were able to go and witness the state of the public hospitals, as obviously these children cannot afford to pay for private healthcare which it itself basic but much better than the

Niamh Hunt
Trinity Hall

public hospitals. These are a world away from what we are used to. The main hospital is 45 minutes' drive away from the MSPN centre, and the situation is absolutely dire. There is minimal sanitation and a complete lack of medical equipment and medicines. Patient confidentiality does not exist, as we were able to sit in the doctor's surgery and watch as he examined numerous sick children. Diagnosis was often made and then basic painkillers prescribed or, more often than not, there was a shrug of the shoulders; "nothing we can do." It was also distressing to note that the children we were with were made to wait to be seen due to their having HIV, which further demonstrated the attitude which exists towards the virus in Nepal at the present time.

At the weekends we were able to take a couple of days to go and visit some areas which are slowly building up some basic level of tourism. We travelled 6-8 hours to get to these destinations on a small bus along roads on the side of cliffs with absolutely no barrier between ourselves and the 100 foot drop beyond! We visited Pokhara, where we climbed up to the World Peace Pagoda, the Patan Durbar Square, and Chitwan National Park where we were able to ride elephants, a definite highlight of the trip! I also managed to book myself onto a flight to see Mount Everest which was a great experience.

One of the highlights of our time in Nepal was undoubtedly the trip which we organised for every member of MSPN to go to the national zoo. This was a new experience for the children as it is a luxury which none of their parents could afford, despite it costing less than 25 pence for a Nepali child to visit the zoo. The children were so excited to see the snakes, the monkeys and especially the elephant. A wonderful day was had by all.



We are incredibly grateful for the assistance of the Trinity Hall Association who helped to make our trip possible. To say that our time in Nepal was eye-opening and rewarding would simply not do it justice. Though undoubtedly challenging, the time I spent in Nepal has really allowed me to appreciate just how fortunate we are in the UK. The Nepalese are some of the most genuine, welcoming and friendly people that I have ever met and the determination and positivity of the children at MSPN, despite their difficult circumstances, is truly inspirational.