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## A Light In Their Lives - Kathmandu, Nepal

By: **Carleton Cole**

It's 8:25am, not long from the start of school, and RCDP volunteer Jenny Dea expertly wields a toothpaste tube, squeezing out dollops of toothpaste onto the several toothbrushes held by small outstretched hands in the Light For Nepal Orphanage in northern Kathmandu, which provides rays of hope for several local children.

"Namaste!" they proclaim while holding their hands in a position of prayer at their chest, the typical Nepali greeting. "What is your name?" "Where are you from?"

At 8:30am Dea walks with them, two of the youngest ones hand-in-hand, to the Nepal Matri Grihasocial primary school. The kids know all the back-lane shortcuts (she sticks to the main streets when walking back to the orphanage on schooldays) so there's plenty of help both given and received. A few older kids peel off from the younger orphans at the secondary school. At this point an effervescent youngster grabs my hand, ending my note taking for the time being. But to this writer it feels a privilege to be trusted as an adult by one of these gentle souls.



Rajesh, my new five-year-old friend and I are starting to get to know each other through his good English—the language of instruction at his school. We are falling behind the group, so like, well, schoolboys we scamper up to the rest of the children and Dea. I slowly try to let go to see if I can get a hand loose to write with, but young Rajesh just tightens his hold on three of my fingers. Along the way are tiny general stores, fruit markets, Hindu shrines and a few back-lane surprises, like two Western women who Dea later says were the first foreigners she had seen in the 10 days she had so far volunteered in the area of northern area of the Nepali capital. That alone ensures cultural authenticity in this volunteering project. The random temples and bustling attractions of the area further seal the deal.

We meet up with Dea and the five youngsters she is accompanying as two cars traveling in opposite directions compete to fit through an impossibly narrow stretch of road hemmed in by Newari red-brick buildings on either side. There's not even enough room for pedestrians to squeeze by in. Eventually might makes right and the bigger vehicle breaks through the logjam. It's all part of the fun of enjoying a typically urban Nepali street scene.

"With many of them their parents have passed away," Dea explains about her young charges. Both Dea and her partner in care-giving, Charlotte Anderson, hail from Toronto, Canada and are in their early 20s.

"We've tried to teach them about hygiene. The children had toothpaste and toothbrushes, but they didn't use them," explains Dea.

She made lathering up their faces with soap "a kind of dance" in order to tempt the kids into wanting to keep themselves clean. Dea has tried to make a positive impact by introducing liquid hand soap to the center. She made it a habit more fun to pick up by showing the kids they could make ever-popular bubbles while lathering up.

The orphans were using soap to wash their hair with soap before the Canadians introduced them to shampoo. As only cold water is available, the orphans shower just once a week. The water isn't any warmer for the volunteers. But rouging it and living by local standards provides unique insight into the local culture.

"I've never met so many independent five-year-olds in my whole life," says Anderson, who calls the orphans rather self-sufficient when compared to the rather coddled kids of a similar age back home in Canada.

Still, the children, especially the younger ones, enjoy the attention showered on them by Dea and Anderson, and greatly value the impact they two have already had on their lives.

"Mostly we play with them," says Dea, who with Anderson have free time from 8:30am when they drop of the children, until 4pm when the two young women pick them up. This is their primary time for getting to know the Kathmandu Valley.

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The orphanage is run on a shoestring budget and it is difficult to provide nutritional meals—even the quintessential Nepali meal of dal baht is not made here. Instead both the children and volunteers eat spinach, potato and other veggies with rice. Meat—generally chicken—is served about once a week. Once the couple was befriended by a neighbor who offered them pieces of papa, a crispy, circular Nepali bread that they found delicious.

In the daytime, the duo have done the accessible sides of fabulous Kathmandu, including the Monkey Temple (the Buddhist Swayambunath Stupa) and the capital's stunning Durbar Square as well as the ever popular Thamel travelers' district. The fabulous Chitwan National Forest is in their sites as well.

The Canadian duo appreciates how the RCDP programs allow for not only the deep cultural immersion that volunteering provides, but the schedule that affords for seeing the must-see sights—as well as a few diversions off the beaten track.

To follow their three weeks of volunteering and daytrips, Dea and Anderson are looking forward to taking on the Everest Base Camp trek over two weeks.

The twosome strongly believes that volunteering is a good way to understand the local culture.

The older kids do a lot to help out. One teenage orphan cooks breakfast while another prepares dinner.

The volunteers' day starts at 7am, when they help the children review their homework. Their homework is first at night. It is reviewed the next morning in order to make sure that the kids know the answers cold, and can thus evade the smack of a stick against their wrist or the disciplinary measure of repeatedly writing a sentence about their mistakes on a chalkboard.

The orphanage has a kitchen, two rooms—one for the six boys and one for the five girls—plus a volunteers' room and red brick courtyard good for playing games in.

The Canadians instilled a token of conscientiousness by getting the children to turn down the TV's volume when the orphanage's oldest resident, an 18-year-old, was studying in his room nearby.

"The kids here did not have a parent figure. Volunteers are here 24/7 as caregivers and entertainers," says Anderson.

The kids are endearing and kind to a fault. The duo was at first treated by what Dea describes as "like royalty". After at first letting the orphans wash the volunteers' dishes in the kitchen and clothes on the rooftop, the couple started washing their own stuff to make themselves more down to earth.

"We don't feel sorry for the kids here. They are taken care of. They have food and a pace to sleep. They have clothes on their backs," says Anderson, adding that many of them have family members, albeit ones who cannot afford to care for them. "We are more concerned about the street kids in Kathmandu."

"At the end of our stay we would like to give a cash donation," says Dea, who hopes that it could be targeted towards maintaining the upgraded hygiene of the children, lest unclean practices like not washing up with soap after using the bathroom creep up again. They further hope that more funding can go to the replace the kids' ramshackle shoes and holy socks.

As for what her parents thought about her Nepali adventure, Dea says "All parents have concern when sending their 22-year-old daughter to a third-world country." But her soothing emails back home made whatever lingering concerns of her mom and dad melt away.

"There was a lack of toys and games here. We brought a Winnie the Pooh jigsaw puzzle that was so popular that after a few days the edges of the pieces had frayed."

"You can only play tag and duck duck goose so often," says Dea. "We decided to buy books and toys and games. The coloring books are a complete hit." Their drawings are displayed on a wall.

Dea says that living in Nepal has been a thrilling, heads-first adventure, summing with great sincerity that "There is only so much a guidebook can tell you about a place."

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