

Nepal House....One Counsellor's Journey

By Connie Easton, Editor BC Counsellor

And Sandy Hui

Sandy Hui never realized that when she started her Master's practicum in Counselling Psychology at Touchstone Family Services that one day it would take her to the other side of the world. Sandy, a secondary school counsellor in Richmond, spent her summer volunteering at Nepal House in Pokhara, Nepal. Her work centered around teaching and supporting the Nepal House staff providing clinical supervision, counsellor training and consultation. Nepal House Society is a non-profit organization that dedicates resources to providing therapeutic support for the children of Nepal. Its website at www.nepalhousesociety.org states their aim as follows...

Nepal House Society aims to alleviate the suffering of traumatized children in Nepal. Civil war, followed by civil and political unrest has taken their toll on the children of Nepal. Children have been on the receiving end of violence, exploitation and a lack of protection from local, municipal and national authorities. Nepal House was established to provide a means for children to heal and recover from abuse, neglect, violence, trauma and the loss of innocence. Through the use of art, play and talk therapy children are given something beyond two meals a day and life in an orphanage that offers little hope to many.

Sandy's journey began three years earlier when she first learned about Nepal House from her co-worker and mentor at Touchstone. As the Chairperson of Nepal House Society, Ashwin Sharma shared with her many stories about how the children of Nepal are often the ones to bear the burdens of poverty and civil war. She was inspired by Ashwin's passion and was intrigued by the possibility of helping Nepali professionals develop their counselling skills. While there are many non-profit organizations (NPO's) and non-government organizations (NGO's) in Nepal which serve children, there are no others that offer both clinical training for counsellors and therapy to children. Already spending the previous summer trekking through China, Sandy was excited to have the opportunity to live in Nepal for the summer and the chance to contribute to a worthy cause.

Life in Nepal was a powerful experience for Sandy on both a personal and professional level. Nepal is country rich with breathtaking landscapes, diverse cultures and religions; however, it is not without problems. Over three-quarters of the population rely on agriculture as the main source of income. Unemployment and poverty are real issues plaguing the country. As a trained counsellor, she found it challenging at times to work in a culture where issues of mental health are not talked about and concepts like depression and anxiety are not widely understood nor accepted. As such, part of the work done by Nepal House is to educate the local community about these issues. Family systems often struggle and children often experience tremendous stress inherent in these situations. It is no wonder why Nepal's suicide rate is on the rise and children become fast victims of neglect, violence and exploitation.

When she first arrived, Sandy found herself transplanted into another world that was far different than life in Canada. Life had a slower pace and the amenities of western living that we take for granted such as consistent electrical service and paved roads often did not exist. A typical day found Sandy rising early to attend yoga class before heading to the Nepal House office by bicycle. On her days off she often took the opportunity to travel around the country. Over the course of eight weeks, Sandy worked with the Nepal House staff to provide training on the Foundations of Counselling and outlined how to recognize the indicators of mental disorders such as depression, attention deficit disorder, cognitive impairment and anxiety in children using the DSMR-IV-TR. Sandy provided clinical supervision for the staff and consulted on the organization's school plan to open up a school for girls in May 2011. The aim of this new school is to provide a safe place with an opportunity to learn and be empowered through therapeutic counselling and student-centred teaching practices. . The education of these girls and all the associated costs (e.g. fees, uniforms and meals) will be covered by Nepal House and sustained through fundraising efforts in Canada.

Since returning to Canada and jumping back into work with both feet, Sandy says it has taken her awhile to transition back to life in the western world. It was difficult to get used to the fast pace of life again and she reflects that for the first couple of weeks home city life seemed "sterile" compared to her colourful experiences living in Nepal. She even found herself strangely missing the constant sounds of horns honking and her daily encounters with herds of cows freely wandering the streets. While there certainly were many challenges to living and working in Nepal for two months, she says that the joy of getting to know her coworkers and truly immersing herself in that culture far outweighed any inconveniences.

For those who would like to take a similar journey, Sandy recommends being able to stay wherever you are going for an extended period of time so that you can truly experience the country whether it be through work, travel, or both. In that way you can truly transition from one culture to another not only to observe the obvious differences but also appreciate the subtle similarities between two seemingly different worlds.