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Lumos Final Report

Summary

In the five months I spent in Nepal, the first two and a half months were spent teaching English at a local private school in Kathmandu called Sunrise English Boarding School. In the latter two and a half months, I was on a team of volunteers in a school construction project, also in Kathmandu. For each project I stayed with a different host family, where breakfast and dinner was served during the work week and on weekends I spent much of my time with the family members.

Expectations vs. Reality

In the 6 months after receiving my Lumos funds and before leaving for Nepal, I did not spend much time building up expectations for my trip or about the country. I did a fair amount of research on Nepal and watched documentaries that explored less common things found there. I think this is crucial for someone attempting to live in another country for 5 months or longer. You can't build up unrealistic expectations, or worse, unnecessary fears.

Since I felt fairly prepared for what I would find in Nepal, there were only a few things that differed from my expectations. Two of those were the weather and the dust. I did not expect the heat to be so hot, the cold to be so cold, and the dust to be so invasive. Shortly after arriving I had to buy a face mask. The dust levels in Kathmandu have been proven to be comparable to smoking at least 2 packs of cigarettes per day.

Host Families

My first host family was the Shresthas. A family of ten that live in a relatively affluent neighborhood south of Kathmandu in a town called Patan. There was Kedar, the father; Usha, the mother; Abibsha, their 16 year old daughter; Anshu, their 10 year old daughter; Babu Ram, the grandfather and his wife; Saroj, the host father's brother Saroj, his wife, and daughter Arsi — and on occasion the host father's sister Sarita would stay at the home. I stayed in a small room by myself, and there were two other volunteers living at the home at that time.

The Shrestas were the most kind and hospitable family I have ever met. Each meal was cooked for the other volunteers and I every morning and evening, and they provided filtered water for us to drink and a shower and toilet to use. The family always seemed happy and they loved to joke with me. I quickly bonded with their 10 year old daughter Anshu as I would come home from the school and play card games with her. I was given the nickname "Sambabu", which means "young Sam" or "baby Sam".

On weekends, the Shresthas liked to go on walks. Walks to the store, walks to a small festival, sometimes bus rides into the city to shop around for clothing or sunglasses or fresh produce. They always stick together as a unit and no one gets left behind. Instead of spending time with some of the other volunteers in the city on weekends, I chose to spend time with this family because they just kept inviting me and it was always fun to learn more about their way of life together. They always asked me questions about my girlfriend, my hometown, my business ideas, my studies on water treatment, and my teaching experience in Nepal. They are genuine and caring. When I left the country, the mother cried as I pulled away, just as you'd expect any mother to do for her own children.

The second host home I stayed in was just down the street from the Shresthas' house. Although I'm not sure who it belonged to (as there was another family living upstairs I never met), my new host mother's name was Susmita. She was accompanied by her two children, Soham and Susita, age 6 and 13.

Susmita was a wonderful host and an even more wonderful cook. She greeted us all (at one point 9 of us) every morning with hot bean curry and roti. I became addicted to this breakfast food. Something about it made me feel at home. Her son, Soham, was a character. He loved to come join the guys and I in our room to box with us, show off his RC car, or kick the soccer ball way too hard at us. The daughter, Susita, was very quiet, but very funny. She loved to listen in on conversations and try to understand some of the American (or British) jokes we would make with each other.

Typically, the other volunteers and I were much too exhausted each day to have energy to do anything crazy. But occasionally we set aside time on weekends to go on day trips with Susmita and her kids. We went on a big group picnic one day out in the hills to the south. A pack of dogs kept creeping up to us and growling at us to hand over the food, so we had to keep moving our blanket further and further away. We also enjoyed blessing her and her kids by washing dishes for her, or cooking meals for her, or running to the store for groceries if we had time. It was great to see the smile on her face when she received these things, because it was the last thing she expected.

Social & Cultural Barriers

In the 5 months I stayed, I did notice a few social barriers that had to be overcome. The Nepali culture is not very private. To ask for privacy, or to expect it, seems strange to them sometimes. I think it's because they all love to live together as family units and things like privacy are just not usually an option. I had to learn to open up and just spend more time with the family when I would otherwise be spending time alone reading or writing. Another thing I noticed is that being a guest in Nepal is very different. "Guest is God" tends to be their motto for hosting people in their homes, especially when that guest is a foreign volunteer. This means that they will absolutely do everything for you. Cleaning, cooking, plumbing, supplies, water collecting, etc. However, I became so close to the Shresthas that I was able to start helping out around the

house and did some heavy lifting for them. Drinking is frowned upon! So I was surprised when, at the very end of my trip and on one of my last weekends with the Shrestas, the host father, Kedar, gave me a beer at dinner time and told me to join him. This was comforting to know that I was now part of the family.

Project Descriptions

My first project was a teaching position at an English Boarding school called Sunrise. The Principal's name was Surendra and the Vice Principal's name was Anita. I taught English and organized some basic hygiene sessions at Sunrise from January to the end of March.

My first two weeks at Sunrise were just a warmup for the big leagues. After the second week I was put into a classroom on my own and had responsibility for teaching the lessons for each day and keeping track of homework, tests, and attendance. I taught a range of age groups: Kindergarten, 1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade, and occasionally I sat in on lessons for the 5th grade class. I dedicated my time to learning the kids' names, coming up with unique projects for them to work on, and making sure they were getting disciplined and organized, as their new school year starts in April and I was coming in at the end of the former one. Their year according to the Nepali calendar is 2074, currently. By the end of my time at Sunrise, I knew all the names of all the kids in every class I taught, played games with them to help them learn, brought chocolates as prizes, awarded hard work, and coordinated with other teachers to come up with new inventive ways to teach them.

One of my signature projects at Sunrise was the implementation of a weekly proper hand washing line, in which I took the entire student population to the wash basins with soap that I purchased and brought, to show them proper hand washing after using the restroom. In Nepal, they don't have toilets and they don't use toilet paper; they have holes in the ground and use buckets of dirty water to wipe their hands off. Proper hand washing hygiene is more than necessary. I got them to do this every week, and after a while they were forming lines on their own and even the other teachers were making them go wash well before they could eat lunch.

My second project in Nepal was a construction project in which I was on a large team of volunteers constructing school buildings. I joined a team of 5 volunteers on a site where we built new brick walls, dug ditches, laid foundations, and paved sidewalks. We were guided and taught by a local Nepali engineer, Asis, and some local stone masons, Mandai and Nandai, as well as a project coordinator from Projects Abroad named Paps and a local Projects Abroad employee named Saroj (who happened to be the brother of my previous host father).

Each day at the construction site was very organized. We rolled onto the site packed in a van, got out, and were always greeted by Asis, a young local engineer who was always laughing. He always waited until we all walked up and would say "Okay guys, what we're gonna do is...", and then it would be a new task each day. It would often rain in the middle of the day, making it impossible to mix concrete. We mixed the concrete on the ground with shovels by making a mound of the stones and concrete mix with a hole in the middle, like a volcano caldera. We

poured buckets of water into that caldera and mixed everything together with the shovels. This was back-breaking work, and I still have yet to see a chiropractor about some issues I might have caused by doing this.

I didn't come up with any significant extra projects on the construction site, but I did become very skilled at making squares out of steel rebar. There was a die that the mason had made for bending the rebar into squares so that they could run like a tube across a foundation for reinforcement. At one point I was commended by Mandai personally for my skill at making these squares.

Impact

I believe I made an impact on Nepal by showing hard work and servitude in the home and the jobsite. I applied myself to a teaching position I would never attempt as a career in the U.S. and I was successful in influencing the students. I served my host family in their own home by providing unasked-for assistance in their daily life. I only hope that I helped influence the Nepali people's perspective on what a good guest can be. I wanted them to know what it means to serve those who can't always give back. And they understand this so well already.

Nepal deeply rooted its ideas in my mind. It changed the way I think about getting things done. In Nepal I was able to accomplish things quickly by bargaining, being confident, learning directions quickly, and setting daily goals. I can apply this to my life in the U.S. by being less affected by perceived barriers, whether I'm looking to start a business or to find firsthand research. Money traveled farther in Nepal, so I was able to sustain myself and use those resources to help others. I can apply this in the U.S. as well, by becoming more disciplined with my finances and finding ways to use my money to help others.

Advice

Some things should be avoided in Nepal. Don't go out too late (as with any country), although Nepal is relatively safe compared to some other places in the world. Don't spend more than you need to on food or supplies. There are plenty of people looking to raise prices for tourists, as their economy runs on tourism. However, it is widely encouraged to learn how to bargain or barter for items. Knowing those skills and using them daily will surprise the locals and allow them to respect you for understanding their way of business. Seek out the less-traveled roads! Go away from the host home once in a while and find a new city to explore and new foods. There are millions of options for food on the street, and millions more hidden gems. Almost every food shop in Nepal can be considered a "hole-in-the-wall". My only advice for touristic travel in Nepal is to go out and do things you would never get to do in the U.S. Don't eat American food. Don't go drinking all the time. What I will personally endorse is renting a scooter to ride around in traffic and explore the temples with! Renting a scooter can be as cheap as \$5 per day and is so much easier and more rewarding than taking public transportation. However, you must also be able to forget your claustrophobia and hop on that crowded bus every once in a while. Go seek out the unexpected. Don't be bland!