



MAKING A **DIFFERENCE**

Yukon non-profit builds education in India and Nepal

By Tara McCarthy



Liesel (in red) and Rosemarie Briggs (in green) with students at the school Hands of Hope built in Nepal.



Photos: Hands of Hope

Below: Liesel and Rosemarie meet with the school headmaster.



All it took was one visit to India and Rosemarie Briggs knew she wanted to help.

“It’s hard to see the suffering there without helping. If you see people suffering, how can you be there and not do something, right?” she says. “But you think, *I’m just a traveller. I’m a backpacker. I can’t help anybody.* It’s overwhelming, so you give a little money on the street and that’s it.”

The desire to do more led Rosemarie and her mother, Liesel, on an unexpected journey to form Hands of Hope, a Yukon-based non-profit that assists underprivileged children and adults in India and Nepal.

It began with a serendipitous moment, in 2005, after Rosemarie had tea with a Tibetan monk in Dharamsala, India. Not long after their meeting, she received a message from him with a list of people in need. However, she didn’t know where to start.

“So what do you do? You phone your mom,” Liesel says with a smile. Originally from British Columbia, she came to the Yukon in 1969 for a job at the *Yukon Daily News* (now the *Yukon News*). She and her husband, Ken, visited India and Nepal during their travels in the 1970s and developed a deep interest in the countries.

In an effort to help Rosemarie with the Tibetan monk’s list, Liesel sent an article to the *Yukon News* highlighting a few of the people who needed help. Phone calls started pouring in from Yukoners wanting to donate.

“It’s kind of like cracking open a door,” Liesel says. “You open it to help a couple of people, and then suddenly you realize there’s so much need.”

With donations coming in, the pair did their homework. Rosemarie travelled to interview each person on the list to ensure the money was going to something legitimate. The Briggs took a holistic approach to helping each of the Tibetan refugees, but their humanitarian efforts didn’t stop there.

While spending time at an orphanage in southern Nepal, Liesel recognized another group in need. “[The children] didn’t have any storybooks. In their rooms they’d have one thin blanket—no window glass; it was dusty and buggy; clothing and food was minimal,” she explains. “It all welled up inside of me that these orphans needed help.”

At that same time, Rosemarie was working with impoverished children in northern India and experiencing similar emotions. “I began



HANDS OF HOPE BY THE NUMBERS

- Refugees Helped:** 46
- Orphans Helped (Post-Secondary):** 8
- Cost for Post-Secondary Education:** \$1,600–\$4,000 per year (includes food, clothing, shelter, school fees, transportation, misc. expenses)
- Cost to Construct Average-Size Classroom in Nepal:** \$5,000
- Cost to Create a Library:** \$1,500
- Libraries Completed:** 6 + one starter in India; 3 in Nepal
- Largest Library:** 3,000 books (in India)
- Schools Completed:** 1 (Lumbini Gyan Prabha School in southern Nepal)
- Cost to Purchase Books:** \$1 each
- Cost to Sponsor an Orphan:** \$1,500+ per year (includes food, lodging, study)
- Cost to Sponsor a Tibetan Refugee Family:** \$250 per year

For more about Hands of Hope, go to hands-of-hope.ca.

Photos: Hands of Hope

"...IT CAME BACK TO EDUCATION—GIVING PEOPLE OPPORTUNITY AND KNOWLEDGE."

thinking about how to change things and how to start addressing poverty," she says, "and it came back to education—giving people opportunity and knowledge."

In 2007, Liesel and Rosemarie bought books in Kathmandu to take to an orphanage in southern Nepal. It sounds like a simple task, but the Maoist uprising at the time meant road strikes. Thankfully, the pair managed to talk a taxi driver into the trek.

"At first he wasn't too impressed, but then he realized what we were doing and got super involved," Rosemarie recalls. "He even helped us unload. Everyone there was so excited. The kids took the books and piled them up on their laps."

From the beginning, their actions have been more about making a difference and less about officially establishing a charity. However, attention from the Yukon media eventually pushed the Briggs to give their work an official name: Hands of Hope. And continued local support has enabled it to grow. Individual donations, events, sales of Hands of Hope coffee produced by Midnight Sun Coffee Roasters, and various projects at Yukon schools have helped raise money.

"It's really amazing how generous Yukoners are," Rosemarie says. "Yes, we're the ones working, helping, and physically going there, but really we're the conduits for other people's generosity. It's a group project; it's not just us."

In 2014, Hands of Hope completed its largest project to date: Lumbini Gyan Prabha School, a two-storey building in southern Nepal with a library of over 1,000 books. "It's really an exciting process to see the staff go from not knowing how to organize a library to using books with the kids," Rosemarie says, "and it's amazing to see the excitement on the students' faces."

Many of the children affectionately call Liesel and Rosemarie by the names "Grandma" and "Sister," a testament to the family-like connection they've created.



Rosemarie and Liesel with some of the children they've helped.

Beyond libraries, Hands of Hope sponsors Nepali orphans to attend post-secondary school, like 20-year-old Rohit who is studying in Kathmandu and hoping to attend medical school. He was one of the first orphans to access the books Liesel and Rosemarie delivered, in 2007. Now they've set up a college fund for him through gofundme.com.

"If one of those kids gets through school, they will change the entire course of their family history," Rosemarie says. "They will have a future and can create a whole new reality for their family."

While the April 2015 earthquake undoubtedly affected the entire country, thankfully the Nepali children and adults connected to Hands of Hope are safe, as is the school in

Lumbini. While Liesel isn't sure when she'll return, Rosemarie travels back to India and Nepal in November 2015 to check-in with the orphans and refugees.

Although they allude to constructing another school someday, both are cautious and uncertain when discussing the future. However, the Briggs are sure of one thing: Yukoners have made their desire to help a reality.

"If it wasn't for all these fantastic people here it wouldn't happen," Liesel says as she clings to a photo album filled with memories. "It makes me tearful."

Rosemarie nods emphatically. "Isn't that the truth," she whispers as she smiles at her mother. **Y**