

SCOTS TEACHER INSPIRED TO SET UP CHARITY TO HELP

NEPAL'S POVERTY-HIT CHILDREN



GROWING CONCERN: Douglas's Child Welfare Scheme has opened a training centre and, right, development bank in Nepal

'A woman thrust her dying baby into my arms, it changed my life'



HELP IS AT HAND: Douglas with his wife and daughter, above, and, below, a mobile health worker cares for a sick child

DOUGLAS Madagan was two days into a backpacking trip through Nepal, and still wide-eyed in wonder at the beauty of the Himalayas, when a shrieking woman ran towards him and changed his life forever.

Spotting only the second white man to ever visit her tiny village in the remote region of Annapurna, the woman saw a vision of hope for her dying baby girl and thrust the six-month-old into the Scot's hands, begging him to save her life.

The child went limp in his arms, but the teacher, with no medical knowledge or supplies, could do nothing to help little Sangita and she died the next day.

The 27-year-old wasn't just taken aback by the traumatic scene, he was moved to tears.

And while he could do nothing to help that child, who was suffering from pneumonia, he vowed to do everything he could to save the thousands of little Sangitas all over the remote and impoverished region.

A year after his trip in 1993, Douglas returned to Nepal with his life savings, on a mission to set up health and childcare services in the misty villages.

That turned into a fast-growing charity, the Child Welfare Scheme, which in the last 14 years has helped 80,000 children. Douglas has remained in the

By Brian McIver

b.mciver@dailyrecord.co.uk

Himalayan state ever since, marrying a beautiful woman, Insupa, from that first village and setting up home with her and their daughter, Fiona, four. Another little Madagan is on the way next month.

But Douglas is still haunted by that early encounter. He said: "I wanted to get off the tourist track so went to the remote village of Saimereang.

"When I arrived a woman came up and presented me with this little girl, who went floppy in my arms.

"The mum knew her little daughter was very seriously ill, I was her last hope. She thought there was this white man and I'd be able to help her, that I'd have medicine or be able to take her to a city.

"She didn't realise I was just a regular person, I'm not a magician or a doctor, and it was very frustrating to see the desperation in her eyes.

"There was nothing I could do, I didn't speak Nepali. I just had to hand her back. "The mum realised she'd left it too late, the town has no running water, the nearest roads are a day's walk away. She'd probably only been to the local shaman for a blessing to take out evil spirits.

"The next day, before I left the village, the girl died. That's the kind of thing that changes your life."

Douglas returned to the UK

determined to do whatever he could to help the villagers and their children.

He discovered that the child mortality rates in the area were among the highest in the world, at a shocking 30 per cent.

The country is one of the poorest in the world, with 42 per cent of children living below the poverty line, 48 per cent malnourished, and 75,000 kids dying every year before their fifth birthday.

After convincing the Nepalese government of his intentions, he was given permission to build a day care centre in Saimereang, where he had given a harsh introduction to child life in the mountains a year earlier.

With no financial support from the authorities, he used his own money to set up his first Daycare Health Centre with the help of local villagers. A second soon followed in the nearby town of Wachouk.

He stayed in Saimereang, living in a mud and stone hut, enjoying the locals' sparse diet of rice, lentils and millet.

He said: "We have a safer motherhood programme, and we teach awareness about general health.

"The hospitality of people in these towns and villages is stunning and we can learn from. In fact, with that warmth and the setting of the mountains, it does remind me of Scotland in many ways.

"My family are from the Pitlochry area, and there is a real affinity with Scotland, because the Gurkhas traditionally came

from here, and they often served with the Royal Scots."

Within two years Douglas had opened two centres, exhausting his own personal funds by spending almost £30,000 on getting the project started.

With the Nepalese government still unwilling to chip in for health care centres, he had to look abroad and in 1996, he travelled to Hong Kong, a base for many Gurkha expats from the area, on a fund-raising mission. He recruited dozens of generous donors and decided to make things official.

That was when he set up Child Welfare Scheme, a registered charity to collect funds and implement projects.

Expanding to open 13 Daycare Health centres, Douglas then turned his attention to urban poverty and made sure that CWS, now with fundraising operations in London and Hong Kong, was extending its reach as far as possible.

Spending time in the larger cities like Pokhara, Douglas was concerned by the street kids, who lived in slums if they were lucky, and on the roads if they were not.

And he was alarmed to find that between 12,000 and 15,000 Nepalese girls are annually trafficked into the cross-border sex trade, while 3.2 million work in child labour.

Douglas opened the first Asha health clinic in 2000 in Pokhara, which now cares for 13,000 kids per year, and is the base for

safer motherhood programmes and mobile health clinics which reach out to the slums.

They also run vocational centres which help train and educate the poorest kids, as well as managing a whole social infrastructure for street kids, including a restaurant, a bank and work programmes to help get them out of the slums.

The projects also work to look after kids who are vulnerable to a sex trafficking trade, which spirals them off to India to work as prostitutes.

Douglas said: "In my heart, the street child project touches me the most. "These are kids who have been forced out on to the streets, they don't want to be away from their parents or be beaten up by businessmen who find them sleeping on their doorsteps. They don't want to be raped by corrupt police on the street at night, or gangped on by drug-addicted older boys."

Having helped more than 80,000 children to better health and a better quality of living in the last 13 years, Douglas has been overjoyed with the life he has found for himself.

But it's not just the satisfaction of helping others that makes him happy with life in Nepal.

Shortly after starting up the first project back in Saimereang, he met Insupa, a villager who had started working with him on the daycare centre. In 1999 they

were married, after five ceremonies in total – one engagement, one family wedding, one village wedding, one British wedding and one Nepal town hall wedding. They now live on a farm just outside of Pokhara.

He said: "I've never sat back and thought about what we've done in the last 13 years. It is a very serious subject, but it's so much fun to see those smiles on faces. The team have been great, we all have fun, and at the same time thousands of kids get good support."

"I was planning to stay two years, but I'm still there, that's how things work out.

"My perspective has changed since I had my daughter. I've realised how vulnerable kids are, and it increased what made me want to do more."

He added: "But it's not about Douglas, it's about a fantastic team of people who are doing their best to help others.

"I'm no good samaritan or saint. I like a dram and a laugh, and I'm just a normal guy with a family, who is doing whatever he can to help others.

"And I have a great time doing it."

● To find out more about CWS projects, or to donate money, visit www.childwelfarescheme.org or call 0207 488 4394.



PICTURES: DALE CHERRY

'I've realised how vulnerable kids are and I want to do more'