

Douglas Maclagan

The former teacher talks to **Nadine Bateman** about how he came to found a children's charity in Nepal and why Hong Kong has proved so helpful.



POWER OF THE PRESS The *South China Morning Post* ran an article about my mission and it gave me the foot in the door I needed.

A shark of a lawyer called Gordon Oldham saw the article and is now the charity's chairman. He issued a challenge. He said I needed collateral and he was a publisher at the time, so he offered to print my first annual review, which I needed to give to potential sponsors. It was on one condition: that I get all the material to him within two weeks. But I'd never written an article before, I didn't have a computer or fax and I was staying in Chungking Mansions.

Everything I had about Nepal and the work I was doing was handwritten. I didn't know how I was going to do it. So I rang England, I asked friends to fax things over. I got DHL deliveries of photographs and information filtered through until I gradually put it all together. Gordon then printed it free of charge. Almost 14 years later, you can see how much it has helped: Hong Kong now accounts for about 50 per cent of the funding to the CWS.

The SCMP was and is incredibly effective. The following year another article was written and more people offered help.

LUCKY MAN I'm a dad now. I live in Nepal with my wife, Insuba, who is a health worker, and

our two daughters. I'm lucky to have a family. In Nepal, 50,000 children die before their fifth birthday every year; 48 per cent of under-fives are underweight; 49 per cent will never learn to read or write; and an estimated 15,000 girls are trafficked into the sex trade each year.

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME The CWS doesn't really have any costs, which means 92.5 per cent of all funds we raise go straight to the projects. I now get a salary but for the first 11 years I didn't. I lived very simply and cheaply in a mud house. I still live in the village but we moved to a bigger house when my first daughter began to crawl and I saw a massive viper – 3 metres long. We get four hours of electricity during the day and that's difficult. With blockades in the south there's no gas and we're cooking on wood again.

A typical day on my farm (www.fursekolafarmhouse.com) starts at 5.30am. It is a non-profit-making organic eco-cottage. [Foreign] visitors can bring their kids, who get to feed the goats, collect the chickens' eggs and learn about milking a cow, planting rice and what it feels like to play in the corn. It's all about getting back to nature and seeing the real Nepal. We plough the money back into local projects, so people are still being charitable while on holiday.

EASY LIFE I had a pampered life growing up in London's Swiss Cottage. We were comfortably off as my granddad had helped set up [retail giant] C&A in London's Oxford Street; my dad was a stockbroker and my mum was good at investment. I attended St Anthony's, an independent boys' prep school in Hampstead, which was run by a very open-minded man who attracted a lot of respect from wealthy parents. His name is Brendan Mannion and he's now one of the board members of the charity I founded [Child Welfare Scheme (CWS); www.cwshk.org].

DEPTHS OF DESPAIR I became a teacher and also worked with young immigrants and I took some youth counselling qualifications. In the early 1990s, I was in a relationship with someone who had mental health problems and I took some time out to go backpacking and think about life. While in Nepal, I ventured off the beaten track and encountered a young woman who put her dying baby into my arms. Her pregnancy had been difficult and she was still in pain. I'm not a doctor or a health worker but I saw the anguish on her face – I've seen it countless times since on other

faces; it's the depths of despair – and I knew something had to be done.

The infant mortality and suffering in third-world countries is really unfair. It makes me angry because it's avoidable.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE I first came to Hong Kong in 1996 and it was a culture shock. Even in London I'd never seen skyscrapers so big – Canary Wharf hadn't been built then. Also, it was the first time I'd left Nepal in two years. I'd just completed my first two health centres and I'd run out of money.

A friend told me Hong Kong was a prosperous place. I'm not a businessman but it seemed to me that whether you invest in shares or bonds or people it must be the same thing, the only difference is that investing in people is more satisfying. So I came to Hong Kong with my two 'products': I didn't have much money – only about US\$500 in my pocket – and I could only stay at my friend's place for a week. I had to find a job quickly so I went knocking on doors and asked the manager of the Hard Rock Cafe if I could work nights so I could focus on raising funds for Nepal during the day.