

Ex-teacher finds passion in helping Nepal

MEDICAL NEEDS: Woman has raised millions for the country

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By ASTA CORLEY

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Former Anchorage teacher Linda "Jay" Jackson discovered a passion for Nepal five years ago while serving on a humanitarian mission. For three weeks, the team visited five eye hospitals.

Since that first visit, Jackson has raised \$7 million in humanitarian aid for the country. Her efforts have funded life-saving surgeries, better eyesight for Nepali children, education for teachers and scholarships for students. Her work has supplied books to village schools and medical texts and journals to teaching hospitals, and has helped open hospital playrooms for pediatric patients. Jackson also set up a surgical items recycling project through Alaska Regional Hospital.

"I am literally married to Nepal," she said during a recent telephone interview from Seattle. "Nothing is going to make me quit doing this."

Last summer, she became the first recipient of the Ambassador's Award for Community Service in the 50-plus years that the U.S. mission has existed in Nepal. Jackson received a carved, wooden Buddhist prayer wheel during a ceremony on the lawn at the ambassador's residence in Kathmandu, Nepal. Michael Malinowski, former U.S. ambassador to Nepal, "put the wheel into motion, so to speak," Jackson said.

"When you turn the prayer wheel, that sends the prayer up to the gods," she said. "I feel it doesn't hurt to get all the help you can."

Jackson is assistant to the director of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Nepal. She is also executive director of Helping Hand for Nepal Inc., a nonprofit volunteer organization operated out of her townhouse in Anchorage. All money raised by HHN funds work in Nepal.

"Nothing is siphoned for overhead or running expenses," she said. "When you are a small organization and you're trying to raise money, you have to constantly show your credibility."

The organization tends to pick up small, grass-roots efforts that otherwise may not get completed, said Jackson, who has been involved in a string of successful projects this year.

Through her work with the director of the Gangalal National Heart Center -- Nepal's only formally trained heart surgeon, chief of cardiac surgery and associate professor of cardiology at the teaching hospital -- seven life-saving heart surgeries were made possible for indigent patients. Alaska Regional Hospital played a vital role in securing donations of heart valves for the surgeries.

Sundays find Jackson volunteering at either the heart center or the B.P. Koirala (BPK) Center for Ophthalmic Studies. Through her work with BPK, Bausch and Lomb donated intraocular lenses for cataract surgeries for patients living in rural Nepal.

Jackson also works closely with Heifer Project International, a program that provides livestock to those living in poverty.

Following a presentation on Nepal, the Service High School Honor Society started the SHS Endowment for Nepal through the Heifer Project -- the first high school nationwide to begin an endowment through HPI. Recently, Service High students of teacher Ken Wooster sent goats to Nepal through HPI.

A new Rotary Club was recently formed in Baitadi in west Nepal, where girls typically quit school before third grade to perform manual labor. The club initiated a Girl Child Scholarship fund to keep young girls in school. It costs \$50 for one girl to attend school for a year. The first donation to this scholarship fund came from the Anchorage Soroptimists through HHN.

East Anchorage Rotary and the greater Rotary District 5010 are sponsoring a Healthy Eye Project facilitated by HHN, which will conduct vision screening for more than 8,000 Nepali elementary school children, and provide glasses and surgery as needed through BPK.

Data from screenings will offer valuable information for one of Nepal's first pediatric ophthalmic studies. Teachers at the school are being trained to give basic eye exams so vision screening can continue annually at schools. The rotary grant also supplies teachers with materials to incorporate healthy eye practices and nutrition information into lesson plans.

HHN's latest project is to raise \$1 million for life-saving surgeries and treatment for indigent Nepalis on an on-going basis through the Medical Emergency Endowment Fund. Rheumatic fever remains prevalent in Nepal, and there is a higher percentage of pediatric heart patients there than in developed countries.

Although a congenital heart surgery for a child in Nepal costs only \$1,500, some families earn only \$200 a year.

In 2002, Jackson was the first recipient of the Sister Cities International Dick Oakland Award for service to SCI and humanity. She was one of 10 women in the United States to receive the Women Helping Women Award in 2003 from Soroptimists International.

Jackson was a Fulbright Award recipient in communications and journalism, and was named one of the top three technical educators nationwide in 1996 when she received the American Teacher Award.

She was also honored by the prime minister of Nepal in 2001 for her humanitarian work, particularly in the area of avoidable blindness.

She has presented more than 60 programs on the local, state and national levels to raise awareness of Nepal.