

Nepal honors Anchorage woman for her vision

OPHTHALMOLOGY: Linda Jackson works to boost Third World eye care

Run Date

10/24/2001

Day

By Asta Corley

Anchorage Daily News

During a recent visit to Nepal, Anchorage resident Linda "Jay" Jackson experienced a real eye opener: If somebody is blind in a third-world country, there's practically no help. Jackson has worked to change that, and was recognized for her contribution in September.

Resources are so limited in Nepal, Jackson said, that only one computer exists at the Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala Lions Center for Ophthalmic Studies -- the only place there that trains people in eye care.

"Being blind is considered the biggest social and economic loss simply because there is no way for you to function," said Jackson, a local educator and photographer. "Here we have Braille, seeing-eye dogs, ramps. There, none of that exists."

Nepal, which has a population of 23 million, is a small country nestled between Tibet and India.

According to statistics provided by the B.P. Koirala Lions Center, its population is 90 percent rural. Eye care centers are located in urban areas. There are about 50 ophthalmologists for 1.5 million people in the Katmandu Valley and only about 40 for the other 22 million. In Nepal, the backlog is 127,000 cases of cataracts alone, with 35,000 to 40,000 new cases annually.

"A child a day goes blind in Nepal for lack of vitamin A," said Jackson.

She added that only 15 percent of Nepal's people have access to electricity.

"We literally had a bonfire in front of the little guest house where we were staying," said Jackson. "It was like going to camp. The nice part of it is that you have a warmth and closeness with people. You're telling stories because that's your form of entertainment."

Jackson is executive director of Helping Hand for Nepal Inc., a U.S.-based humanitarian development organization. Its projects target the areas of medicine, education and water.

"It has virtually taken over my whole existence," she said.

Last month, Jackson was honored by the prime minister of Nepal, Sher Bahadur Deuba, in Katmandu. Her recognition was part of an inauguration and ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new Community Service and Research Building in the B.P. Koirala Lions Center for Ophthalmic Studies.

The occasion commemorated the 88th birthday of the late B.P. Koirala, the first democratically elected prime minister of Nepal.

The Sept. 9 event also paid tribute to "Fifth Annual Day" (Founders Day) for the B.P. Koirala Lions Center for Ophthalmic Studies. It recognized HHN's constant support toward development of the center and other initia-

tives in Nepal during the last two years.

“It certainly spurs you on,” said Jackson. “It helps to validate that you’re on the right track and that you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing.

“It’s just terribly humbling. That award really needs to be shared by everybody in Anchorage. I’ve had tremendous support from this community.”

Bausch & Lomb has donated 13,000 intra-ocular lenses to be used under the Community Vision Restoration Program of the BP Koirala Lions Center, and Jackson took a portion of them to Nepal. The idea is to make eye care, especially cataract surgeries, accessible to Nepal’s rural population.

HHN also provided a Rotary Matching Grant from District 5010 (which encompasses Alaska, the Russian Far East and part of Canada), supplying the BP Koirala Lions Center with \$28,000 worth of ophthalmic equipment for rural eye camps.

Jackson was instrumental in getting a Peace Corps volunteer position approved for the B.P. Koirala Lions Center. The goal is to supply them with an optometry instructor for two years, since there is no full-time instructor at present. Afterward, one of the graduates will stay on to teach.

HHN facilitates an ongoing Surgical Items Recycling Program between Alaska Regional Hospital and the B.P. Koirala Lions Center. The center’s library often receives ophthalmic journals through HHN. Publishers have donated key ophthalmic texts. The most requested books are encyclopedias. During Jackson’s visit, the prime minister also inaugurated the Community Service and Research Building. It includes the center’s new library where Jackson’s portrait hangs.

Jackson initially visited Nepal in 1999 with her former student, Dr. Ron Zamber, as the documentary photographer/multi-image producer for his Ophthalmic Humanitarian Mission.

She received a bachelor’s degree with distinction in dramatic arts from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., and a master of fine arts degree in photography and creative writing from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She was named as a top technical educator in the United States in 1996 and is a former special assistant to the mayor of Anchorage. She serves on the board of directors of the B.P. Eye Foundation (Nepal) and is the Alaska state coordinator for Sister Cities International. Jackson also focuses on livestock issues through Heifer Project International.

While in Nepal, Jackson was invited to participate in a three-day national conference, “Vision 2020: The Right to Sight.”

She plans to make annual trips to Nepal in an effort to forge links between the cultures by networking through schools, women’s co-ops and other groups. She wants to see a buddy system operate between optometry schools in the United States and Nepal.

“In Asian countries, making that personal contact is probably more important. There, your resume is more secondary to what you’re like as a person, so you’re not going to get very far if you don’t go over to meet those people. It also shows that you’re serious.”

“It underscores again as an educator how powerful positive reinforcement is. They are not rich in material things. They are rich in inner peace, family and friendship relationships, and communicating with each other in that way.”