



STRIKING A DELICATE BALANCE

A KATHMANDU ACADEMY PRESERVES TIBETAN CULTURE WHILE PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD.
STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN APRIL

"I love Nepal," says John April. The Indianapolis journalist has made five tours of the country, including 2014 when he visited the Manjughoksha Academy in Kathmandu. This is the story of that experience. Earlier this year, however, April's heart went out to the Nepali people as images and information flowed across the Internet of the destruction caused by massive earthquakes. Read April's blog about the disaster on the Kiwanis magazine app or at kwn.is/kinepal2015.

Mingmar Lhamo is a mother of two living in a quiet neighborhood on the outskirts of Kathmandu, capital of the tiny Himalayan nation of Nepal sandwiched between India and China. Her people are Sherpa, an ethnic

group from eastern Tibet that settled in the mountainous regions of Nepal hundreds of years ago, before Nepal was a country. When Mingmar Lhamo's husband died eight years ago, she quit the

poor plot of land they'd been farming in the remote Solukhumbu district—famous as the location of Mount Everest—for the capital, hoping to find good schools for her 17-year-old daughter, Passi and son Mingmar, 15, as well as better paying work.

Many of Nepal's public schools offer a good education; however, few teach the Tibetan language, and Tibet's cultural aspects are neglected entirely. While the country's Tibetan schools preserve language and culture, the standard of education is generally poor. Mingmar Lhamo was fortunate enough to place her children at the Manjughoksha Academy, established



Mingmar Lhamo and her two children, Mingmar and Passi



Children from the Manjughoksha Academy

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in 1995, a kindergarten through 10th year private school that serves underprivileged children from Nepal’s mountainous frontier regions whose residents have close cultural and religious links with Tibetans.

The Manjughoksha Academy is the brainchild of three seasoned educators: Doma Yangkyi, a former Tibetan school teacher and registered nurse; Sonam Choten, a former private school teacher; and Gyanje Hishi, a former employee at the Tibet House, the Dalai Lama’s cultural center in New Delhi. Each witnessed firsthand the poor quality of education being received by underprivileged Tibetans in Nepal, knew how ex-

pensive and complicated sending children to school in India could be, and felt that, in the system at the time, Tibetan culture was being lost. To bypass these problems, they founded a new school with two objectives: to impart a modern education and to safeguard Tibetan language, culture and traditions.

Other than the Tibetan and Nepali language classes, all courses at the Manjughoksha Academy are taught in English. “This is what differentiates our school from other options,” Choten says. “English is the most relevant language for a modern education.”

The curriculum at the Manjughoksha Academy is on par with Nepal’s finest



public schools and includes English, science, math, environmental and social studies, accounting, health science, morality and information technology. Extracurricular activities include art, sports, music, dance and debate. Mingmar Sherpa and his sister agree that math is their favorite subject, but after school he prefers soccer; she, basketball.

Classes meet 5½ days per week for all but one month in the year. Full days begin at 9 a.m. and end at 3 p.m. (4 p.m. for seniors). Thirty full-time teachers preside over more than 400 students. Part-time foreign volunteer educators offer extracurricular courses. About half the students come from the country's more remote areas and are therefore boarders living year-round in on-site dormitories. The other half commutes daily from in and around Kathmandu. Uniforms are compulsory. Twenty-one staff members manage the physical plant, including a dining hall that serves meals year round. A physician attends to the students three times a month. Each student undergoes an annual physical exam. Boarder tuition is between 80,531 and 100,076 Nepali rupees (NR) per year, depending on class level. Commuter tuition is between 54,638 and 72,344 NR, which includes bus service and lunch.

Overseas donors in Switzerland, Germany, France and the United States sponsor nearly the entire student body. Each donor receives a dossier on the sponsored student, progress reports three times a year, regular letters from the student, as well as a Christmas card.

"A fresh stack of admissions applications appears on my desk every week," Yangkyi says. "My job is to match these applicants with sponsors. I can handle between 50 and 60 more students before we're full."

When new students arrive, the school helps them settle into their new

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life, which includes fresh bedding for everyone. “Children from the mountain areas bring the same bedding they use at home, which is full of bedbugs,” Yangkyi says. “I want to start all over.”

Mingmar Lhamo’s son, Mingmar Sherpa, was fortunate enough to meet representatives from his sponsor: the Kiwanis Club of Bern, Switzerland. The same club secured a Kiwanis International Foundation grant, which was used to purchase new uniforms, textbooks, and stationary for the school and its students.

The school’s current site was completed in 2011 with donations from Manjushri Verein, a Swiss nongovernmental organization. Prior to that, the administrators struggled with various landlords to rent buildings within close proximity of each other so students could remain together.

In a nearby neighborhood, Mingmar Sherpa’s mother works as a food server and dishwasher at Buddhist parties, seasonal employment at best. She earns between 300 and 500 NR a day, which isn’t much in Kathmandu where monthly rent costs upwards of 4,000 NR, a 1½-month cooking fuel supply costs 2000 NR, and food costs 100 NR a day.

“Naturally I am very happy and grateful that my children are able to attend this school,” Mingmar Lhamo says.

Most sponsors continue supporting the children after they’ve completed their education at the Manjughoksha Academy. Since the school’s founding, about 30 students have completed the coursework. Most go abroad to seek higher education.

“All the students who go to the United States or Canada tell me they don’t need to take supplementary English courses,” Yangkyi says. “Their English is good enough to start their ordinary course of studies straight away, which makes me quite proud.” ☺



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