



Shedding the light on

Nepal

Alex Fullerton (pictured right) is no stranger to supporting women in business; many know her through her successful operation of the Sunshine Coast Women Entrepreneurs organisation. However, her recent visit to Nepal with Shed the Light was a trip with a difference. Her first time travelling to Kathmandu since 1991 and with her two children alongside.



by Angela Reedman-Polinski

ALEX FULLERTON has recently returned from a one-month adventure in Nepal, sharing support and resources through a Shed the Light project to empower local women in business, and she decided to take her children on this journey.

"I felt it was the right time. The kids are getting older and before they move away, I wanted to enjoy another holiday with a purpose and treasure the moments that we have together."

Alex and the family spent the first week together in Kathmandu and then daughter Ella joined the Annapurna Circuit trek and son Flynn hiked to the famous Mount Everest Base Camp.

"This trip started when Ella developed a school project while attending Glasshouse Christian College last year, fundraising under the \$5 Make a Difference project. She raised funds in a tin to collect money via the school and a local hairdressing salon, Follow Me Hair, in Glasshouse.

"Together they raised over \$100 which ignited the spark of supporting the village further by visiting in person."

Before departure, Alex called on the community to offer donations of personal hygiene supplies, warm clothes, school and office supplies and cash.

"We were overwhelmed with people's kindness in cash and goods donations. Dental Excel Beerwah supplied four cartons of toothpaste for the children of the village, who we taught to care for their own teeth by brushing regularly down by the river.

"My house began filling up with warm hand-knitted beanies and coats, paper, pens, books and toothbrushes. We managed to get it all through our flight with just one kilogram of excess baggage, so that was a relief!

"When we arrived, the contrast between the old Kathmandu and the new was striking, with electronics now being cheaply available and internet accessible in the city via hotspots."

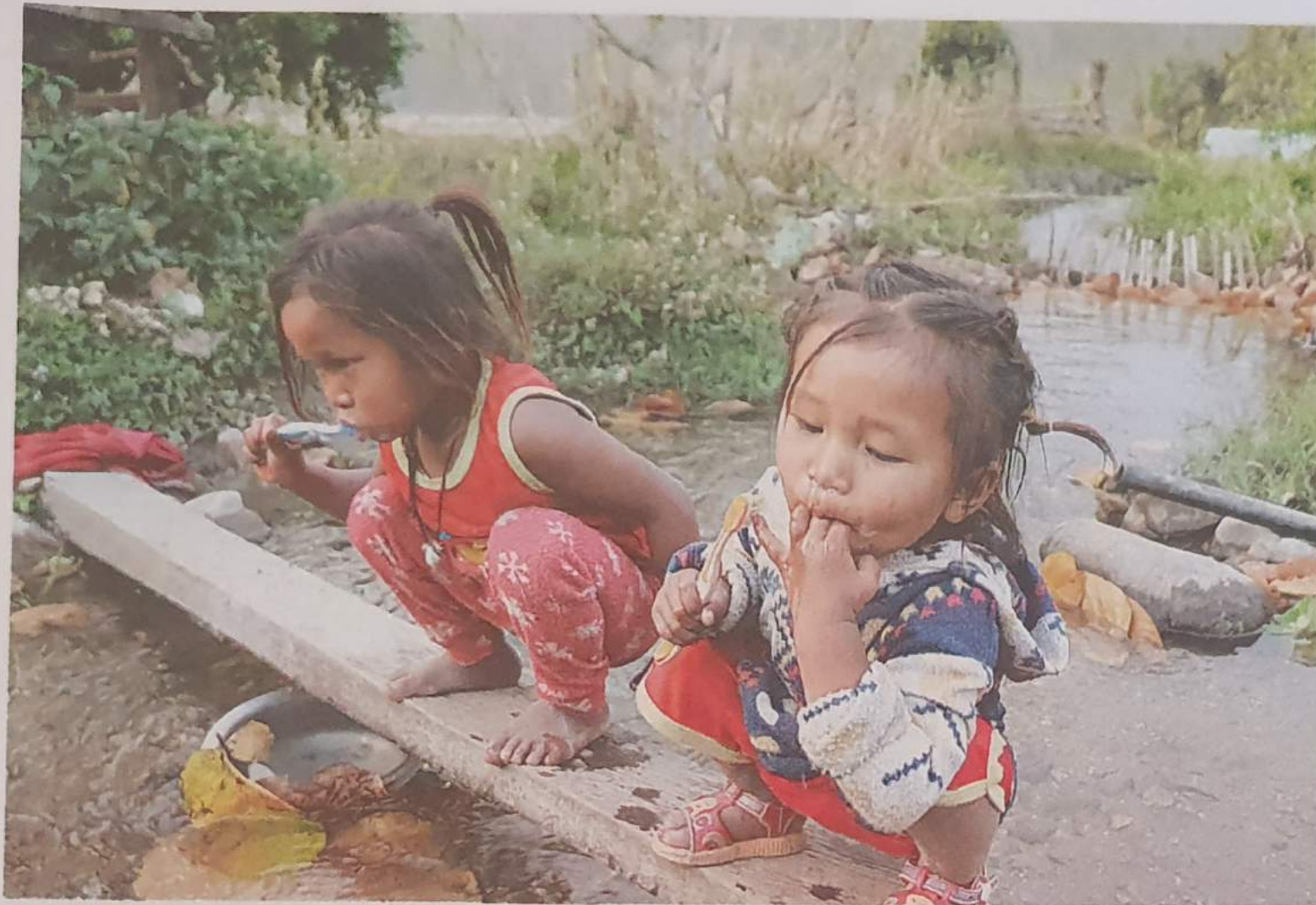
Alex marvelled at how so much had changed and yet so much had remained unchanged outside of the city.

"I watched as an elephant handler, a 'mahout', strolled through the bush on the back of a domestic elephant carrying logs, while he thumbed through his mobile phone.

"We still saw a lot of homeless people and people with disabilities begging on the street. It is a stark contrast to our everyday lives here and a long way

A 'mahout' with his phone while riding an elephant

Image by Anish Shahi



Left:
New toothbrushes make teeth cleaning fun by the river

Below:
A young girl breaking down stones alongside her aunt at Sindupalchowk

Images by Anish Shahi

from the 'voluntourism' perceptions and guided tours."

Working on a Shed the Light project developing women's empowerment, Alex and Ella worked within the village to get to know the women and children and provide hands-on support at a grassroots level, offering their skills along with fair and equitable donations.

"Sleeping on a beaten earth floor in our sleeping bags became our new normal. We pitched a tent on the verandah to maintain privacy and to keep safe from the tigers and brown Nepalese bears around the village."

The camp has no running water and no drinking water, so they collected water as required. Their food was basic village food, nutritious vegetables and rice without all the usual Western food influences.

"We met the most wonderful people and got to see the work of Shed the Light in action. Our interpreters and guides, Anish and Phebika, were once the orphans that the charity supported and raised to be a part of the village.

"Anish Shahi has developed his skills and created his own freelance photography business and provided all of the professional level photographs from our trip at just 23 years of age."

The women work on old pedal-powered sewing machines and create reusable sanitary pads which are bought locally and distributed to other villages through a personal hygiene education program.

"The sewing project is developing women's business acumen by teaching them the hands-on skills to create an income, manage expenses, do bookkeeping and manage risks such as walking alone at night."

One of the barriers that the women worked to overcome was the language differences. While there is a little Nepalese spoken in the village, the locals are from all different areas

and dialects.

Ella and Alex shared pencils with the children and helped them practise writing their names in English, drawing and just enjoying the fun of happily colouring-in.

"I enjoyed watching Ella teach the children about make up too as they keenly watched her with fascination applying different creams and applications. She also taught them how to re-use the offcut fabrics to make hair scrunchies as another form of income."

Before departing, Alex and Ella haggled in Hetauda to secure good prices for a new sewing machine, a desk and fabric supplies for the women to grow their business.

"It was amazing how much we could fit in a tuk-tuk! We



wanted to support them to begin making full tunics and pants outfits to practise sewing and then branch out into selling them later.”

It sounds like the trip of a lifetime and has inspired Alex to return at some point and offer support again.

“One of my favourite people on the trip was a barefoot 97-year-old man who I called ‘Pa’. He told me many tales, including how he had settled the village when he found this particular crook in the river and decided it would be the right place to settle.

“The most striking story was of his battle in his early 90s with a brown bear which took one of his eyes and badly scarred his abdomen. I could have listened to him all day, he was fascinating, and it was an amazing adventure.”