

Feature Story

Habitat for Humanity

Nepal Build 2019 by Kerry Scarlett

Nepal was struck by a huge earthquake in 2015 which caused devastation, significant loss of life and over 800,000 homes were destroyed. In April I volunteered with my girlfriend to help these people put their lives back together and give families a real home and a new place to live by assisting with ongoing efforts as part of the earthquake reconstruction project in Kavre, in the Kathmandu Valley.

The magnitude 7.8 earthquake that struck Nepal on Saturday April 25, 2015 caused considerable devastation and loss of life. It was followed by another magnitude 7.4 earthquake to the north east near Mount Everest on 12 May. According to the government of Nepal, more than 8,800 people were killed. The effect on housing was devastating, with more than 800,000 homes destroyed and damaged.

Since the earthquakes, the recovery process in Nepal has moved from the emergency phase to recovery and now, reconstruction. Despite challenges caused by political upheaval, fuel shortages and difficulties navigating the mountainous terrain, Habitat for Humanity has been able to undertake disaster recovery efforts to help families rebuild their homes and lives.

We were a part of a group of 30 volunteers from all over Australia and New Zealand and we kicked

off with a visit to an incredible not for profit organisation called Seven Women which was in Kathmandu. Seven Women was founded by a young Melbourne woman Stephanie Woollard over 10 years ago when she was just 22 years of age. The organisation helps young women in need through training, scholarships and education. These women have been rescued from some of the most horrific conditions and they now have a chance to live a normal life through the help of Seven Women.

It was very emotional to hear some of their stories from human trafficking, arranged marriages at the age of 12 to being left on the street to survive. These women were inspirational, having suffered and conquered. Stephanie's team is doing amazing work empowering women, making change and rescuing those in need and giving them hope. I had a strong urge to assist this organisation in the future and have a fundraising night organised at the club on November the 26th where Stephanie will be in attendance. I recommend reading her book with



the title 'From a tin shed to the United Nations. How every one of us can make a difference'.

From Kathmandu we then travelled to Kavre district by bus which took us 3 hours. It would normally have taken 1.5 hours, but we encountered severe flooding along the way. We stayed high up in the mountains at a lodge. I attended a briefing that night with my group of 30, another Australian group of 10 and a Canadian group of 10. We all stood up and introduced ourselves, learnt how to introduce ourselves in Nepalese as well as learnt what to expect on the build site, important policies, managing expectations, staying healthy and dealing with culture shock.

We headed off each morning at 8am to travel an hour to the build site in a convoy of four-wheel drives winding along mountainous steep roads of beautiful scenery. The last 20 minutes of the journey consisted of full-on four-wheel driving.

We were working in the Panchkhal Municipality where most people still depend on farming for income and the place is famous for its seasonal crops. It is populated by people of different ethnicities found within Nepal. The home partner belongs to an indigenous ethnic group called Danuwar, who are traditionally inhabitants of the hilly regions of Nepal. We were rebuilding homes in a village called Tinghare where most houses were affected by the earthquake with people still living in shelters four years on.

Upon arrival at this agricultural village we were all given the blessing. We then spent the morning, all 30 of us forming a human conveyor line passing brick after brick down to the site. The afternoon was similar but passing trays of sand down to the site. I spent a lot of time on the end of a shovel also. It was so muddy with red clay and stinking bloody hot. All the while having to work around buffalos, cows, goats, chickens, old ladies and little kids. We would drink at least 5 litres of water a day and am now experienced with the squat toilet lol.

It was very tiring, manual work and I now have a new respect for brickies. The days seemed to get hotter. With the

bricks and sand now on the site the next step was to lay the bricks. I spent most of the morning on day 2 sifting sand. This was done by shovelling and throwing the sand onto a large vertical upright sieve using the shovel to dispense the sand and then scrap the rocks left behind of the sieve. It was bloody hard work and the sweat just poured off me. There were two of us on this job rotating with shovelling the clean sand into a pile for the mortar makers. I also spent a lot of time carrying mortar and bricks to each corner of the house. Most of the rest of the build I spent applying mortar to the joins in the bricks which was hard, hot work. Kneeling on my knees that ached, then moving to a standing position bent over but then the back ached, so back to the knees again. All the while sweat constantly running down my face and dripping off my nose.

The highlight of day 2 was meeting the family we were building the house for. Mum who doesn't know how old she is but is over 70, her son, his wife and their 4-year-old daughter who was so tiny because they are malnourished. Their original house which was just 5 metres from where we were working was damaged during the 2015 earthquake with substantial cracks visible. The family was put into temporary housing – a tin shelter but it was unbearably hot, so they decided to move back to their house which they share with their animals, risking their lives as its extremely unsafe. They were delightful and through an interpreter expressed how grateful they were.

The remaining days consisted of much the same and everyone had their jobs to do, which consisted of soaking bricks, laying bricks and filling the bricks with mortar. We built two adjoining houses, the other being for the brother, his wife and 6 children.

My body starting to cease up at this stage and when I stopped, I could barely move from the waist down.

It was so surreal living and working in a third world country and really gives you quite a culture shock. We would come back to the hotel each day after working a 7-hour day filthy and aching, desperate for a shower. But most days we didn't have any hot water. It really annoyed me one night after a hard day's yakka



but then I reflected on everything and everyone around us. You see the community of families we assisted didn't have electricity to their homes, nor bathrooms or running water. They sponge bathe out of a dish which is filled from a communal tap in the open air. Quite often we'd see Grandma half naked sponging herself and washing her hair from the water pump directly in front of our build. So cold shower it was again but no complaints from me.

One day a lovely young mum of two small boys asked me into her home. Dirt floor, a gas cooktop and an open wood fire cooking a pot was all I could see with chickens wondering about inside and oh so different to our way of life.

We truly don't realise how blessed we all are to be living in Australia.

We had an exciting drive to our build on Day 4 with a 10-car convoy and a police escort due to a planned political strike. This was to ensure our safety and a different route was taken for the hour-long journey. Our Habitat leader said we should have felt privileged as this in normally only provided to the President.

This same day was the first clear morning since we arrived and could see Mt Everest and the snow-capped mountains from our lodge which was just stunning.

We had a few less bodies on the build this day as some people had become ill.

I must say it's so impressive that we were building a house with very little tools. Nothing that is seen on our building sites in Australia and there were certainly no cement mixers around.

The people in our village were just so lovely. Language was a huge barrier and I did wish that we could communicate better with them. One day in a shed opposite us a Nepalese man was grounding corn into flour and one of our dear grannies spent absolute hours doing her clothes washing. No washing machines here and no supermarkets to grab a packet of flour from.

One day on our way home we stopped at a village called Pipaltar. Before the earthquake hit in 2015 there were 91 houses in this village. After the earthquake struck there were only 2 houses left standing. It was devastating



and even before the reconstruction phase could begin so much work was required to remove rubble and to rebuild the road to this village. This work was completed by Australians and made me feel proud. The houses that now exist are identical to what we were building. Instead of using clay bricks they now use kiln fired bricks. Together with the concrete slabs that now support the homes they should withstand an earthquake reading up to 10 on the Richter scale. Seventy-five houses so far have been rebuilt here. Habitat for Humanity have also conducted a lot of training with the Nepalese. Where once there were only two trained builders in this village, there are now 40.

Our last day on the build was Good Friday. We worked a full day and wouldn't even have known it was Easter as the Nepalese are mostly Hindu and Buddhists. We left with some trepidation this day, as it was to be our last day on the build. Sadly, we didn't complete our houses but certainly gave the families an awesome start and hopefully will see them finished in no time. Our house was a dual dwelling sharing a common wall with two young brothers' families whilst the third house was for a middle-aged couple and had the most beautiful views of the countryside. On the final day we had a ribbon cutting ceremony for all three houses with the families. The families blessed us all and for the last time we said our goodbyes and trapped down the hill to our car. Off back to our accommodation for the hour-long journey down the bumpy dirt roads and long winding road where regularly we tempted fate with oncoming traffic when trying to overtake.

The week had been hard, hot work and back breaking at times. I ached in places that I never knew I had lol, but it was one of the best experiences I've embarked on. I'm so pleased that I put my hand up to be a part of this journey. I met so many wonderful people from all over Australia, two Kiwi's and a group of Canadians from all walks of life with fascinating life stories. We all shared a common goal – to help those less fortunate than ourselves.

I raised \$5260 of which 'your club' donated \$2,000 towards the build. I paid my own way so all this money goes to helping these people, which as you can see will really change their lives and give them hope.

A safe home gives people the opportunity to be healthier, happier and more secure and for children to be more nourished and better educated. We believe building a decent home provides much more than bricks and mortar – it provides real hope for the future.



The Nepalese Coat of Arms