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Teaching Amid Destruction

Carol Majdalany Williams '75 P'11 helped keep a Nepalese school open and students learning

By Gerry Boyle '78

When the April earthquake struck Nepal, the village of Koshidekha, like most in the region, was destroyed. Five people were killed. Houses collapsed or were severely damaged and, amid aftershocks, they were left uninhabitable. Residents slept outdoors and dug through rubble with shovels and bare hands.

But the village's Shree Ram School survived. And Carol Majdalany Williams '75 P'11 kept right on teaching.

Williams and two friends—sisters Carolyn Damp and Joan Holcombe—had arrived in Koshidekha just 10 days before the quake, volunteering to teach village children English and to teach local teachers ways to teach more effectively.

The trio was enjoying the students and the staff, they liked living with the principal and his wife, and they rose to the challenge of teaching with supplies like paper and books in short supply.



Carol Majdalany Williams '75 P'11, right, with friend and fellow Nepal volunteer Carol Holcombe.



On their day off, Saturday, April 25, the three Americans were hiking in the hills outside of the village, exploring a Hindu temple, when they heard a strange sound.

Shree Ram School Principal Rajman Tamang, with damaged house in Koshedekha. Below, the village before the earthquake.

"It sounded like a freight train going through a tunnel," Williams said. "A loud rumbling, deep noise. Then the earth started to shake so violently we couldn't stand up. We left the temple area and just threw ourselves to the ground."

The quake lasted just 53 seconds, but the damage it caused was almost incalculable, with more than 8,000 dead and a vast swath of the country leveled.

"We looked out over the hillside and there were all these ochre-colored clouds of dust, including the village we had just been in," Williams said. "A complete collapse of the buildings. They're all made of fieldstone and mud. They didn't stand a chance."

A boy came and found them and led them back to the village, where houses were in ruins, but the school, built with reinforced concrete by Swiss contractors, was intact.

So Williams and her friends did what teachers do. They taught, as the principal and other staff dealt with tragedy around them. The school reopened in four days. And the students, amid the destruction, came to learn.

"We were trying to instill some normalcy in their lives," said Williams, a former Montessori teacher. "We were thrilled that they would come."

The students walked miles from their villages, where they slept under tarps in the open. They examined books and magazines, to which they were unaccustomed. They played word games and charades, and they were asked to write about their experience after the quake.

That project wasn't successful, Williams said, as the children found it difficult to express their feelings. But their English improved. "We could see the improvement in the two weeks after the earthquake," Williams said.

It was five days before any relief arrived at all. There were no tents, just blankets and some tarps. Medical supplies were scarce.



"They all seemed to be helping each other with whatever possessions they did have, and shared with whoever needed it," Williams said.

She reluctantly returned to her home in Connecticut after the month-long stay was over. "It was really, really difficult," Williams said. "I felt like the job wasn't done. I felt like there was just so much need."

Back in the United States, the three volunteers raised \$25,000 for children's clothing and school supplies, far beyond an initial goal of \$4,800. Williams and her co-volunteers are working with healthcarenepal.org, which funnels 100 percent of donations to the Children's Aide Centre in Kathmandu, an organization run by retired teachers.

Williams said she wants to return to continue teaching teachers, building a foundation for students of the future.

The people of Nepal, she said, "are just incredibly wonderful."

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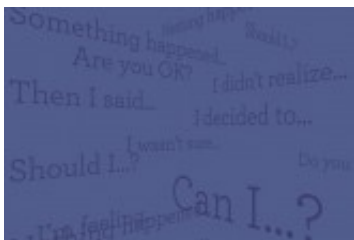
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