

Manx Links... a series in which Cheryl Cousins from the One World Centre talks to local people, who have lived or worked in the developing world, about their super heroes!

How many of us seeing the slim, willowy figure of Leni Lewis, and the rich array of Eastern items for sale in Shakti Man in Ramsey, know of the vision behind this exciting shop? Shakti is an old Sanskrit word meaning strong or powerful; it has its roots in Indian mythology as the feminine counterpart to the masculine energy... Personally, I feel that Shakti Man and it's counterpart Shakti Nepal have shown that the feminine energy is indeed pretty strong and powerful!

Like many a person from our culture, Leni had been fascinated by the thought of travelling in India; she readily admits that the alluring dream of cultural richness and diversity was not linked with much understanding of the life issues of poverty and subsistence living. Her trip to India and Nepal in 1999 was the start of a new awareness... She *was* to find a richness; but a richness of spirit, that has led her to set up a charity and fund the building of an orphanage for street children in Kathmandu in Nepal, and she puts this down to meeting with one remarkable man, Chhongba Sherpa.

Leni first met Chhongba working as a porter on the trekking routes of the Annapurna circuit. Unable to read or write and struggling to survive in the harsh poverty of his rural farm he like thousands of others, had made his way into the city with the dream to work as a porter to earn money for his family. The reality of urban poverty and the desperation for an income leaves many porters vulnerable to gross exploitation by trekking companies and Western tourists. (Seeking a cheap ride, they can burden a porter with carrying up to 4 rucksacks at a time 60 kilos in weight on a meagre diet, without adequate clothing or footwear, for less than \$1 a day.)

It was not what Chhongba did as much as who he was that was the catalyst of change in Leni's life. A porter; an uneducated man, with a heart of love and compassion and a spirit of service and dignity. Chhongba opened Leni's eyes to the beauty of his country, and the reality of the life of his people; vast numbers of people with absolutely nothing, barely enough for a meal a day, but with a happiness that we seldom see in our materially rich society. Travelling Langtang on a trip with Chhongba and a French friend Doninique, the two Westerners began to think about paying back Chhongba's kindness by raising funds to build a new schoolroom in Chhongba's village... a plan that has never reached fruition due to the activities of the Maoists in that area.

But, the first seeds were sown. From the first ideas of bringing back artefacts and selling them to raise money for the project, Shakti Nepal, a registered charity in France and Kathmandu, and Shakti Man, here in Ramsey, came into being.

And the friendship has continued, Chhongba has now become Leni's right hand man in Nepal. From its beginnings with a one day food festival and then a day care centre that offered training in basic skills and health care, they have developed an orphanage situated

in the grounds of Wits Academy school. The orphanage offers shelter to 30 children from low caste families, many of whom were living on the streets of Kathmandu.

Street children are a forgotten strata of society. The striking thing about the majority of cities of the world are the alleys and byways, the cracks and gutters between the fine buildings, broad streets, civic squares and parks. Between all this civic finery live the poor, many of them children. They come from rural families, displaced people, families where there is abuse, alcoholism, where there is no knowledge of health care or hygiene, where there is no employment, no income for education.

Narrow streets, random dumping and no comprehensive rubbish collection in capital cities in the developing world, mean the street people live with and from, other peoples rubbish. Refuse mountains spread down the streets, gutters become choked with garbage. These mountains are “fired” releasing foul smelling continuous poisonous gases into the “homes” of street dwellers. Many street children are rubbish pickers, often acting as recycling agents to raise money from reclaimed objects.

Street children often commit minor crimes that means that law makers and law enforcers see them as trash to be swept up and thrown away. They are arrested, beaten and incarcerated by the police. They are among the most vulnerable of all to the AIDS virus, have a high risk of being sexually involved with other people on the streets, they contend with poor diet, hot sun, exhaust pollution, hazardous traffic, sexual abuse, and often the use of cheap street drugs. They suffer from emotional and psychological damage, they need stability and love. It is estimated that approximately 180 million children are working full time or part time on the streets of our world.

Care for street children is not high on any governments spending priorities, nor are governments successful even when they do commit the money... Orphanages can get people out of the streets, but to get the streets out of the people is a different challenge.

Shakti Nepal has enabled 24 children to attend Wits academy school. The idea that street children could be attending this academy is revolutionary in itself. The dialogue and social adjustment in enabling this to happen has been largely down to the single minded care and work of Chhongba networking across the slums of Kathmandu bringing his special qualities of humility, respect, love, joy and compassion. Because of who he is, he enables people who have no hope, to believe in themselves and in their future.

From different parts of the world they work together, Chhongba in Nepal, Dominique in France, and Leni on the Isle of Man, their vision moves on.

Leni buys fair trade crafts and clothing that support sustainable projects, aware that if the lives of these children are to change, their parents, and thousands like them, need to have the opportunity to work their way out of poverty. Working with Chhongba, the person

who turns these visions into reality, Shakti Nepal and their fair trade partners are now looking to develop opportunities for non academic children to attend carpentry, rug making and knitting workshops. Leni sells these products from Shakti Man and a proportion of her profits go back to fund Shakti Nepal... the circle is complete.

If you are interested in this work and would like more details please contact Leni Lewis on 436297. or come along to the Manx Museum on October 30th at 7.30pm to see the screening of A Fair Trade Story, a film by People Tree Fair Trade Fashion Company, and the opportunity to hear the real life story from producers visiting from Nepal. Tickets £3 adults £1.50 children - available from all Co-op stores, Oxfam & Shakti Man, Ramsey