

Life at 12,000 feet is anything but hospitable

Atty. Curley donates jackets and more to Tibetan school

(Wakefield Attorney Patrick G. Curley just returned from a trip to the remote Nepal Himalayas to revisit the Lophel Ling Tibetan School where he was a volunteer math teacher for 10 weeks in the spring of 2001. Here's Part II of a two-part account of his journey.)

By PATRICK G. CURLEY

I had not informed the school that I was returning. Apparently, as I crossed the playing fields and approached the school, several of my former students from 2001 recognized me and told their teacher that "Delek La" was coming. In Tibetan, Delek means "good" and "La" is a term of respect for teachers and elders. That was my Tibetan name from 2001. The teach-

ers could not believe their eyes and everyone poured out of the classrooms to greet me.

I felt like I was returning to family.

I bought 100 sets of hooded fleece jackets for all students and staff at the school. "Lophel Ling School - Manang" was embroidered in gold and red on each jacket. The jackets offer the students and teachers excellent warmth and durability but also a tremendous sense of pride in their school — the most remote Tibetan school in the kingdom.

In fact, several students were still wearing the fleece jackets that I delivered to the school on my last visit in 2001. Because they had grown over the last four

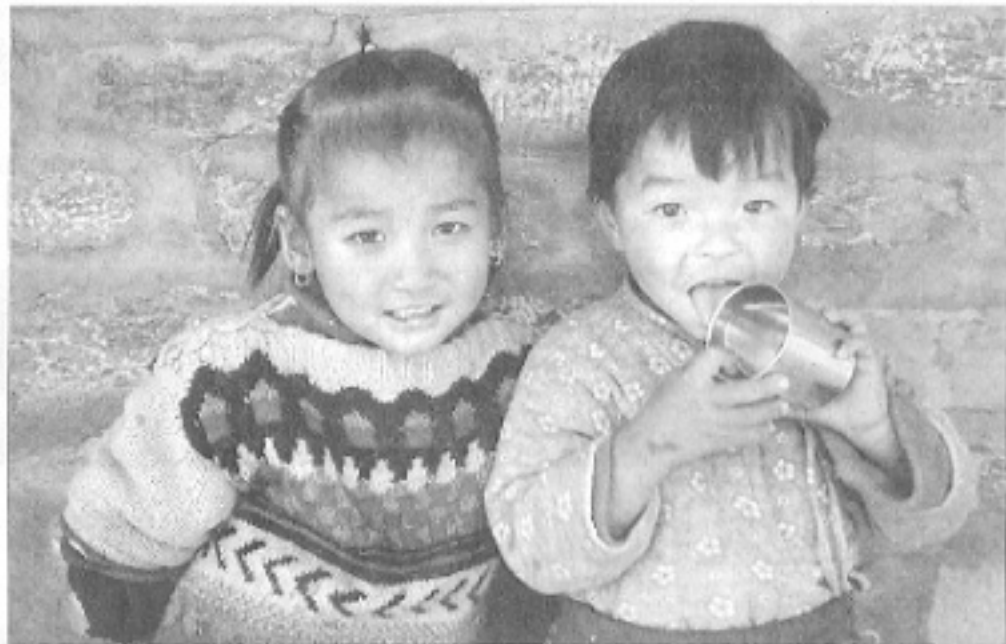
years, the sleeves now barely reached past their elbows!

The new jackets solved that problem.

I also supplied wool socks for the students, many large jars of Vaseline to protect the students' lips and faces from the harsh Himalayan environment and hair ties, hair clips and head bands for the female students.

The school is overseen by the Dalai Lama's exiled government in Dharamsala, India. The 80 students, who range in age from 5 to 12, are children or grandchildren of Tibetan refugees who have escaped to Nepal in the years since China invaded Tibet in 1949. The Tibetans are considered

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ADORNED WITH COLORFUL sweaters and warm smiles are a couple of the children who greeted local Attorney Patrick Curley when he returned to their school in a remote village in Nepal.

refugees in Nepal to this day.

At the school, the students learn Tibetan language, Nepali language, English, math, social studies, science and Tibetan culture. When they graduate from this school, they travel to larger Tibetan schools in semi-permanent, Tibetan refugee camps near Pokhara, a small city at the base of the Himalayas.

While a majority of the students are boarding students, the school is nothing like an American boarding school.

Those who live within a few hours hike from the school see their families one weekend per month. Others who live several days hike from the school see their family only during the three-month winter break when they return to their villages.

Two women at the school who serve as surrogate moms and help with keeping the children happy, healthy, clean and clothed to the extent possible. Similarly, the older students look out for and care for the younger students. In this environment, children grow up a lot faster than they do in more developed countries.

The environment is extremely harsh. The nasty sunburn I received on my first day back at the school was a sharp reminder of the effects of the sun at that altitude. The sun and wind chap and dry your skin and lips. At night the temperature plunges but there is no heat in the school. Each child has a school uniform of gray slacks and white shirt with a gray tie. In order to keep the uniform clean, the children hand wash their uniforms with bars of laundry soap.

Because of its remote location, the school provides a diet of only rice, potatoes, lentils, Tibetan bread and two eggs per week. During the fall harvest, locally grown carrots, beans, onions, cabbage and cauliflower are added to the menu. There is no meat to serve the children.

All food is transported to the school on the backs of human porters or on mule trains. For example, a porter might load up at the base of the Himalayas with over 100 pounds of fresh eggs stacked on his back secured only by a strap across his forehead. Slowly but surely, and for less than \$1 pay per day, he will hike in flip-flops



HELPING with the wheat harvest, Wakefield Attorney Patrick Curley said the wheat will be ground into flour to provide food for the winter at the Lophel Ling Tibetan School, high in the Himalayas.

through the tropical climate at the base of the Himalayas to the cold, high-altitude villages near the school. Along the way, he will sell his eggs until he sells out or reaches the last villages at approximately 15,000 feet elevation. There are simply no roads.

Food is prepared on small inefficient wood stoves. In this region, wood is in short supply but the simple task of heating water for tea requires a roaring fire.

There are no hot showers. This fact combined with the harsh climate and limited nutritional supply leads to

numerous ailments and infectious diseases. Parasites, impetigo, bedbugs, lice and skin lesions are common. When one student gets sick, the close quarters cause it to be spread to others very quickly. The health-care worker for the region has only a few months medical training and limited access to medications.

The good news is that the school has seen several improvements since my last visit including electricity from a hydroelectric generator, solar power for heating water for the kitchen and

vegetable gardens. The solar heating had been designed to also provide hot showers but last winter the mountain rats ate through the rubber hoses that led to the showers.

The teachers welcomed me with exotic dinners that included highly-prized dried yak meat stir fried with vegetables. Yaks are larger than cows and have long furry coats that allow them to brave the Himalayan climate. This delicacy is a real treat because a yak leg can cost 5,000 rupees, which at about \$70, far exceeds the average national income of

less than \$1 per day. We also enjoyed fresh yak milk, which we boiled on the wood stove and yak yogurt.

I helped my teacher friend and her husband harvest wheat. We grouped the wheat in bundles and smashed it into a hollowed-out log so that the wheat grains fell down the chute onto a drop cloth. It was hard work! The wheat will be ground into flour to provide food for the winter.

Two weeks at the school passed very quickly. On the final morning, as I trekked to catch the turboprop down from the mountains, my last view of the school from the steel foot bridge was of the children and teachers waving and hollering "goodbye Delek La."

When I first stumbled off the trail and discovered the school during a trek in September 2000, I had lunch with the children and knew immediately that I would work to help the students. I was struck by the sheer goodness of the students, the commitment of the staff, the beauty of the location and the drive to keep Tibetan culture alive.

It is tremendously fulfilling to make this journey and see first-hand the benefit of my donations. I have developed friendships in Nepal that will last a lifetime and I will continue to support this very special school regardless of the political instability in Nepal.

PACs set record for donations

BOSTON (AP) — Political action committees set a new record. Of the 20 top PACs in