



# HIMALAYAN CHILDREN'S CHARITIES

## Backgrounder

In 1999 Bruce Keenan joined friends on a trip to Nepal to trek in the Himalayan mountains and visit the country's capital, Kathmandu – the experience would change his life and the lives of many Nepali children. During the trek, Bruce witnessed the plight of an orphaned and abandoned six-year-old girl who was not in school, but was working to earn her keep by scrubbing floors and washing dishes at a trekker's lodge. Upon inquiry, he was told that she was lucky to have this work and could have it much worse. While in Kathmandu, the situation for orphaned and abandoned children was not much better, many of whom were living in squalor in overcrowded orphanages with inadequate facilities and little care or education. Moved to action, Bruce immediately began sponsoring two orphaned sisters who were living in the state-run orphanage. The following year Bruce and his wife, Susan, founded Himalayan Children's Charities, with the mission to provide education, nurturing care and innovative mentorship to orphaned and abandoned children in Nepal.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world, and children represent the most vulnerable segment of the population. Impoverished children are at risk of being trafficked, forced into child marriage, subject to gender and caste discrimination and often must leave school at a young age to work in dangerous and harsh conditions. These already dire circumstances are worsened by the common occurrence of parental death or abandonment.

Himalayan Children's Charities (HCC) has gained international recognition for its innovative programs that have empowered orphaned and abandoned children to become strong, self-reliant, and motivated individuals dedicated to contributing back to their society. As a former orphanage director said, "The HCC kids have a little light, a confidence, because they've had someone believe in them and give them skills to exist in the real world, not just in an institution."

HCC's Signature Program was established in 2000 in the capital city of Kathmandu, and serves approximately 50 students. HCC seeks children who are eager to learn and enrolls them in quality, English-medium boarding schools. Each student also participates in the innovative Mentorship Program, which fosters self-awareness, guiding students to discover their talents, strengths, and interests. The students are introduced to team building, communication and leadership training. They are taught life skills, including budgeting, house management, personal finances, and cooking. They are provided career and education counseling, as well as scholastic tutoring. Students also have access to emotional counseling and therapy, an almost unheard of solution in Nepal, to ensure that the systemic trauma associated with abandonment does not undermine their social, emotional and academic progress.

In addition to quality education and mentorship, HCC understands that family forms the foundation for a positive self-image, relationships with others, and stability and confidence. As such, on weekends and holidays the HCC students live at the "family" home, Khushi Ghar (Happy House), where this surrogate family culture provides love, support and

encouragement from both house parents and fellow students.

Giving back to community is a cornerstone of the HCC philosophy, and the children are raised in a culture of giving back, trained in leadership, and involved in service activities. To date the HCC students have: provided healthcare advice and first aid training to rural communities; tutored and mentored orphans at the state-run orphanage in Kathmandu; worked with earthquake relief programs; and delivered anti-trafficking comic books to village families for education and prevention. One innovative program has now been created by the students themselves - teaching feminine hygiene and health practices to rural girls, with the aim of mitigating the social stigma surrounding menstruation.

Unlike the majority of charities, HCC provides children support and opportunities through college, technical school, or university. With HCC's help and guidance, they move into nearby apartments, and upon completing their studies, begin working full time. HCC remains a stable, loving and helpful resource for all HCC students, and many of the graduates regularly visit Khushi Ghar to help lead projects and mentor the younger students. In 2016 the first ten students proudly graduated HCC's program, 80% with university degrees and all of them either employed or enrolled in a master's degree program in such sectors as public health, non-profit, and business. Overcoming unimaginable hardships, obstacles and prejudice, graduates of the HCC Signature Program have emerged as successful community contributors.

In April 2015, devastating earthquakes hit Nepal, causing death and destruction in the rural districts north of the capital, Kathmandu. HCC's immediate response was to support the surviving children of this travesty, by organizing collaborative educational scholarship programs, the Dhading Children's Initiative (DCI) and the Earthquake Orphan Scholarship Program (EOSP). These scholarships keep children in school, helping to mitigate the threat of trafficking. The program currently supports nearly 100 earthquake-surviving students throughout the districts of Dhading, Nuwakot, Rasuwa, Sindhupalchowk, Gorka and Dolakha. It provides educational scholarships for elementary and secondary schooling, as well as for college and technical degree courses, with a number of students placed in local, well-vetted boarding schools. This program also provides supplemental health services and material supplies for the children and their families or caretakers.

HCC has a network of loyal private, corporate and charity support from the US and around the globe. HCC has been vetted and rated by Great Non-Profits and GuideStar. In the U.S., HCC is supported by a dedicated Board of Directors and Board of Advisors, whose level of commitment and personal connection with staff and children create a solid foundation to ensure long-term viability. In Nepal, the experienced team manages local operations and care of the children, as well as management of living facilities; interfacing with schools and government officials; and managing regulatory compliance. HCC has built an extensive network of partnerships with a diverse field of professionals, including educators, child rights advocates, lawyers, government officials and NGO managers, to provide mentorship to the students and staff. Former Nepali President Yadov, after meeting Bruce and Susan, vetted the charity and personally enrolled two orphan sisters.