



When the devastating earthquake struck in Nepal on 25 April, I turned to Facebook to see what news I could glean from friends who live there. Thankfully, they were all safe.

For me, it felt very close to home. Less than three weeks before, I'd been in Pokhara, 45 miles west of the epicentre, making a documentary. My connection to Nepal goes back nearly two decades. After writing an article on sex trafficking for YOU in 1998, I became a founder trustee of the charity Asha Nepal, which helps women and children who have been trafficked or abused, and, in 2002, I adopted my Nepalese-born daughter Simi, now 15.

During my recent Nepal trip, I worked with a young art director, Avi Shrestha. I scrolled through his Facebook posts. A picture of a makeshift tent. People huddled in an open space. A close-up of a tray of eggs. 'People will eat tonight,' read the caption. Remarkably, rather than being a victim of events, he and girlfriend Bina Ghale were running a relief effort.

Following the threads of Avi's network, it became clear that they were not alone. I became gripped by the groundswell of pop-up aid, coordinated through social media. Across Kathmandu and Pokhara, young people were springing into action, mobilising volunteers, procuring supplies and distributing them to those in urgent need. Instead of waiting for the authorities to take control, they took matters into their own hands.

Around the globe, those with connections to Nepal rallied to raise funds – such as TV presenter Melinda Messenger, who is supporting her brother Jamie and sister-in-law Bella's relief work in Gorkha. Within weeks, the top crowd-funding sites GoFundMe, CrowdRise and Indiegogo had raised more than £6 million through over 1,600 campaigns.

A month after the quake, I found myself drawn into action after Avi told me about a village where people were starving and still hadn't received aid. His relief effort urgently needed around £20,000. It seemed impossible, but I emailed all of my contacts asking them to donate and raised over £6,000 in just two days. A week later, 13 trucks carrying 33 tons of food completed the hazardous mission to Dolakha.

The silver lining of the earthquake is that it has shaken up not just the land but the old order in this desperately poor country. 'All this under-utilised energy of the youth has been unleashed,' says Bella Messenger. 'It's been an empowering process.'

Here, some of the guerrilla aid workers who are helping to rebuild Nepal share their stories.



Shristi in a health camp, giving first aid to victims, and, right, being named Miss Nepal in 2012

'It was chaotic on the streets'

RISE OF THE FACEBOOK CRUSADER

Brought up in Falmouth, Cornwall, where her parents run a Nepalese restaurant, Shristi Shrestha, 23, studied nursing at London University and works as a model. She returned to Kathmandu to win Miss Nepal 2012 and, after her one-year reign, stayed on.

The earthquake hit suddenly and violently. I was on a terrace, two floors up, playing with a puppy. I don't know how I got down – I was holding my grandma and the puppy. It was chaotic on the streets. Bus drivers were getting angry at car drivers, because cars were blocking the roads and the emergency vehicles couldn't get through.

On day two, my friend and I volunteered at the teaching hospital emergency unit. We stayed until nightfall, but then we had to go home because men with kukris [knives] had come to loot the area.

After that, we formed a small group and collected relief funds. It helped that I had been Miss Nepal, as people trusted me. My parents held a dinner at their restaurant and raised £4,000. Our first relief trip was to Dhading. It took us 21 hours to reach the village, all off-road. We were the first there.

We continued running relief missions for the first few weeks. We set up health camps and I cleaned wounds and gave counselling. Now we are building temporary shelters, using bamboo, wood, and tin roofs with hay on top to keep them cool. We're also making a community area and putting in sanitation.

I feel guilty. People who are the worst affected by the earthquake are the ones already living in poverty. I'm just trying my best to make life a bit better for them. I'm learning about myself, too. I never thought I'd be able to lead a team, but now I feel I have the ability. One day all this is going to hit me and I'll probably break down. But now I have to be strong and carry on. ►

After Nepal was hit by a devastating earthquake in April, a new generation of aid workers emerged – harnessing the power of social media with life-saving results. *Sue Carpenter* reports

GETTY IMAGES/ARF



'I hope we can keep the momentum going'

Amelia Hillary, 26, is the granddaughter of Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to reach the summit of Mount Everest along with Tenzing Norgay in 1953. She was brought up in New Zealand and Australia, and moved to Nepal in 2010, to continue her grandfather and father Peter's development work. She is a goodwill ambassador for the Nepal Tourism Ministry and is launching a cashmere business, training and employing local women.

The past 65 years of Hillary family history has all happened in Nepal, and that's why the country means so much to us – for me it is home. I'd been visiting family in Australia when the earthquake struck, but I flew straight back to Kathmandu and diverted my team from cashmere to relief work.

Having grown up with our family foundations [the Himalayan Trust and international affiliates] and travelled all over the world with my father and grandfather, I have a lot of contacts. So I got involved, working with organisations such as Shelter Box and the World Food Programme (WFP). People don't know how to procure things here, so I've been using my contacts to help navigate the system, manage projects and obtain CGI [corrugated galvanised iron] for temporary shelters.

The first two months after the earthquake were a blur. We were working 18-hour days. One day, we

joked we're not doing this aid relief properly – we need T-shirts. So we got T-shirts that say 'Team Hillary Jai Nepal' [power to Nepal]. Now we've set up the Hillary Relief Collective as a platform for the various organisations we've been working with.

The next drive is helping rebuild schools to safe standards – they're vital for the children to recover psychologically, continue education and to protect them from trafficking. This is not going to be our last earthquake, but hopefully we'll be better prepared in the future.

I'm proud to be friends with so many young people here who went out and helped. I hope we can keep the momentum going. We need to make Nepal a place where young people want to live, so they don't go to the USA or the Gulf. There's lots to do. As my grandfather used to say, don't rest on your laurels – keep going.

■ hillaryreliefcollective.com



Amelia handing out supplies to villagers in Dhading



'There was so much desperate need'

Photographer NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, 33, runs the Nepal Picture Library and co-founded photography platform photo.circle. She and her friends run the Himalayan Disaster Relief Volunteer Group from her parents' B&B, The Yellow House in Kathmandu, which became the HQ for volunteers, foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media.

The morning after the earthquake, I put out a Facebook post for volunteers to meet up to see what we could do. There was a huge turnout. We stressed from the beginning that people were going to have to self-initiate and fundraise, and that set the tone. I was just coordinating. People brought in their own resources and that was one of the main draws: if you had a truck but no supplies, you could show up and be matched with someone who had.

For the first ten days it was crazy, so much desperate need. We were getting requests from all over. We'd hold meetings at 8am, put request slips on the wall and make announcements – this mission needs eight people, this project is an overnigher, this one needs a particular skill set. Or people would come with their own challenges and recruit volunteers.

We tried to send mixed groups of Nepali and non-Nepali volunteers – people who could speak Nepali and understand cultural nuances, but also foreigners who were

neutral outsiders, which people seemed to respond to in the villages.

We have a parking area that was used for loading supplies, plus a café where we could offer volunteers food and drink; although the first week was tough because there was no water even to flush the toilet. The staff did an amazing job of keeping the place going.

Out of the chaos a core team emerged. I'm the coordinator, doing PR and communications. My brother Jay is a motorbiker and has done a paramedic course, so he and his friends went out to affected areas where there was a risk of fresh landslides and looting on the highways. Nishant, who does the accounting for photo.circle, handles all the money. And Thomas, a data expert from Belgium, has documented everything we've done.

For the first four or five days, I wasn't sleeping at all. I don't know how I did it. We all took a rest after a month. Now we're working on various initiatives – safe buildings for schools and communities, training for teachers, psycho-social support, art therapy and vocational training. This has realigned my priorities. I've been thinking about starting a vocational school for some time. Now I just have to do it.

■ For details of the Himalayan Disaster Relief Volunteer Group, visit facebook.com/hdrvug; theyellowhouse.com.np ►

SHIKHAR BATTARAI, ANNETTE ELKIN, ABRAHAM STREEP



Clockwise from above: volunteers get together for a strategy meeting; the bikers en route to affected areas, and unloading supplies at The Yellow House B&B



f NayanTara's Facebook post, 25 April 2015
Friends in/around Sanepa: meeting 9am tomorrow morning at Shuvatarata to organize volunteer efforts. Pls join us if you can. Pls wear closed shoes, carry an ID, masks, bring gloves if possible.



Bella with local children in Nepal



'I've found my calling'

German-American Bella Messenger, 36, lives with her British husband Jamie in Pokhara, where they run Open Sky Paragliding. They compete on the German and British paragliding teams and Bella is international director of karmaflights.org, a small NGO that helps support villages where they fly.

After the earthquake, everyone was saying, 'Don't go, you're just putting more people at risk,' but we knew aid teams weren't going to be able to reach those remote villages in Nepal quickly. We held a meeting with friends in the sporting community – pilots, rafters, mountain bikers, kayakers – and decided to take a team out to Gorkha, the epicentre.

The entire town of Pokhara rallied round and set up a supply depot overnight. [Within the first 15 days they received over £64,000 in goods and funds from local business owners and tourists.] Within two days of the quake, we had about 40 volunteers, three truckloads of supplies and six motorbikes. We drove for eight hours and pitched camp when we got to the end of the passable road.

Thank God we went. The villagers were in tremendous fear. Aftershocks were causing huge landslides, sending tons of rock and earth crashing down the hillsides. Just seeing us was a morale booster. At first it was chaotic but we learned that if you are respectful, things run beautifully. We used a local church as a supply depot, so volunteers could come and go, and set up a medical camp run by an amazing Brazilian doctor who saved a lot of lives. Mountaineering teams, accustomed to working in high-risk conditions, brought back intelligence from the field.

Now we're putting up shelters as fast as possible because of the monsoon, and getting schools back to normal. We took school supplies to some of the most impoverished villages and they were really excited. They'd never had resources like that before. We have the opportunity to help people not just to get back to where they were before the earthquake, but to take it to the next level.

After a few weeks, I returned to Pokhara where life is pretty normal, but it felt so jarring I had to go back to Gorkha. It's been a life-changing experience. World ranking, competition points – these things seem so petty now. I've found my calling. How can we not be doing this all the time?

■ karmaflights.org

'We had one aim: to get out there'



Film art director Avi Shrestha and his fashion designer girlfriend Bina Ghale, both 30, run the fashion label Gabi in Kathmandu. They set up social enterprise Gabi FRC (Food, Roof, Cotton).

Avi The day the earthquake struck was very blurry. We wanted to help, but we didn't know where to start. The following day we went to an area of open ground in Kathmandu where about 300 people were sitting in the hot sun. We brought tarpaulins, food, water, whatever we could get, and set up three tents for about 50 people. Seeing us cooking food for everyone encouraged people to start helping each other.

Bina What was most needed was tarpaulins to make tents for people who had lost their homes. You couldn't get any in Kathmandu, so we decided to make them ourselves from Flex, a material normally used for advertising banners. We found a supplier who

provided some on credit and we worked in donated spaces – one day a warehouse, the next a banqueting hall. We had a team of 80 volunteers cutting, punching holes and making eyelets. We made 2,133 tents.

Avi After that, we helped at a volunteer coordination centre, and went on missions to Dolakha and Nuwakot. We all had one aim: to get out there. The concept of being victims ourselves only came after two weeks. It just hit us, 'My God, we have to pay rent and our employees.' We needed to go back to work but we wanted to combine it with doing something for our country using our skills. Our big festival in Nepal is Dashain in October, when traditionally we buy new clothes. We're going to make two outfits – one traditional and one casual – to present to every villager affected by the earthquake.

Bina Then we will move on to phase two. There's a lack of tailors in Nepal and we import clothes and fabric from India and China. Our plan is to train women in the villages to sew, knit and weave, so that we can mass-produce clothing and create employment in Nepal. In one month we've learnt a lot. Just by calculating the funds we need to make clothes for the villagers, we've realised how much we could earn for the country. All that revenue has been going abroad: we want to bring it back to Nepal.

■ gabifrc.org; facebook.com/gabifrc



From top: Avi and Bina before the earthquake, and volunteers making tents

AVI SHRESTHA

'The doctors needed saving'



Sudan Gurung, 28, a nightclub owner, DJ and event organiser, was in Kathmandu's Basantapur Durbar Square when the earthquake struck.

I saw the temples falling right in front of me. I started digging out bodies with my bare hands. I took a guy with a leg injury on my scooter to Bir hospital. While I was there, a young girl died right in front of me, in her mother's

arms. That was the moment everything changed for me.

I knew this was where I was needed. Everyone was dehydrated. Doctors don't have time to eat or drink; they are saviours but they needed saving. I went to find water and eventually found one shop open. I did 22 journeys on my scooter taking water to the hospital. In the evening I brought noodles.

There was one boy, about five years old, in a really bad state. His mother had already lost one child and I could feel her pain. I said, 'Don't worry, I am here for you.' It was the best I could do. I called the doctor and said, 'You've got to save this child.' Thankfully he survived.

I posted on Facebook, 'I am here distributing water and food... but I can't do it alone.' The post was shared by 985 people and got 1,080 likes. The next day I had 30 to 40 volunteers, and the day after that 300 volunteers. In two weeks we had 1,200. I assigned two volunteers to one patient, so they received 24-hour service; they'd fan them, wash them, feed them. One team looked after the medical staff, and another was assigned to clean the hospital twice a day, inside out.

I didn't rest for the first two days and nights and on the third night I collapsed. The doctors told me I had to rest. My feet were swollen from excessive walking, but I couldn't stop.

The hospital didn't have an MRI scanner so we needed transport to take patients to another hospital. I put a post on Facebook and we soon had a queue of cars. We'd take reports and run to the Red Cross to fetch blood. I paid for patients' medicine from my own savings – I have thousands of bills. I've spent about £5,000.

On day four, I thought this is not our limit. We need to help people around Kathmandu Valley. So far we've helped 20,000 people. Our team is Hami Nepal ('We Nepal') because people are all about 'Me, me, me' and it's time to say 'We.'

Now we are rebuilding villages with the help of over 3,000 volunteers and the villagers themselves. We want to put in solar power, biogas and water purifiers. Some people think this is crazy, but I plan to change our country. If we are to rise again, let's make it even more beautiful and organised. ■

■ gofundme.com/tt9n65w



Clockwise from above left: Sudan in his club before the earthquake, and helping villagers in need – he has been to more than 15 districts affected by the disaster

