

'I was in Nepal when the earthquake hit'



Kira Kay works with Nepalese locals to create sustainable homes for children. Picture: Kira Kay Source: *Sunday Style*

IT WAS a warm, sunny Saturday, just before noon. We'd gathered en masse on a spread of rugs in our courtyard.

Our 10 girls and 10 boys, aged four to 14, their two house mothers, the village family that voluntarily oversees the project, and I were having a picnic celebrating the end of the school holidays and my last day in Nepal. After a month-long trip, I was flying back to Australia the next day.

The children were devouring a special treat of juicy mangoes and grapes, as the adults sat chatting happily and drinking spicy, sweet Nepalese tea. Peals of laughter filled the air as the kids played and excitedly read their new schoolbooks, which had arrived that day.

I visit Nepal twice a year to check in with the children, mothers and villagers, visiting our homes and projects. The organisation I've helped develop, Hands with Hands, raises funds for these homes and sponsorship for school and education programs, as well as helping to build infrastructure in rural communities.

We provide the start-up capital to establish a home to accommodate 20–25 homeless and orphaned children, and involve women who are also in need (e.g. whose husbands have died or left them) to be full-time, live-in carers. We also invite a family from the local village to be mentors and offer practical local volunteer support. The involvement of the local community benefits the long-term development and integration of the children into adult life. We also aim to provide enough land for the growing of vegetables and livestock to produce food and an ongoing income.



Kira Kay has set up children's homes in Nepal. Picture: Kira Kay Source: *Sunday Style*

Our Bhaktapur home has been in development since 2007 and we were days away from finishing the third storey of the building — it just needed the windows and doors installed. The first sign something was wrong was the sudden rattling of a leftover pile of bricks. Then came a violent cacophony of shaking, the rattling growing ever louder.

Almost instantaneously, we looked at each other and stood up as one. Then we ran to a designated open field away from any buildings, as per our earthquake plan.

The panic and terror was tangible; the children and mothers screamed and we clung to each other, as others chanted Hindu mantras and prayed for our safety. The earth shook violently beneath us for about two minutes. What was once solid now moved like liquid. It felt as if I was trying to walk on a wave. We all watched in horror as our home shook, lurching dramatically from side to side, as more terrified villagers joined us in the field.

Initially, I felt surprisingly calm. I was overwhelmed by thankfulness that our children and staff were safe. The miracle was that we were all sitting outside together, not dispersed throughout the village. If it had happened on a school day, the death toll from the 7.8-magnitude earthquake could have been significantly higher — many schools were reduced to rubble.

Then, on the hillside, plumes of pink dust rose up in cloud-like formations all over the valley. It took me a few moments to realise these clouds of dust were actually people's homes collapsing. It was then that the magnitude of the situation hit me: this would be a nationwide disaster.

In shock, we watched houses that had been built in the traditional brick and mud style in our own village start to crumble. My heart sank as I realised how many tens of thousands of homes would be tumbling in rural areas such as Sindhupalchok and Sunauli, where our other Hands with Hands children's homes are.

Then near-hysterical people came screaming down the hillside. As I looked back to the World Heritage city of Bhaktapur, full of ancient temples, a cloud of red dust obliterated the sky. After a few minutes, the intensity of the earthquake stopped. We hugged each other in relief, but then came the hundreds of aftershocks; the earth constantly moving beneath us. The warm temperature plummeted to an unseasonable biting cold as people shivered in shock. Then it started to drizzle.



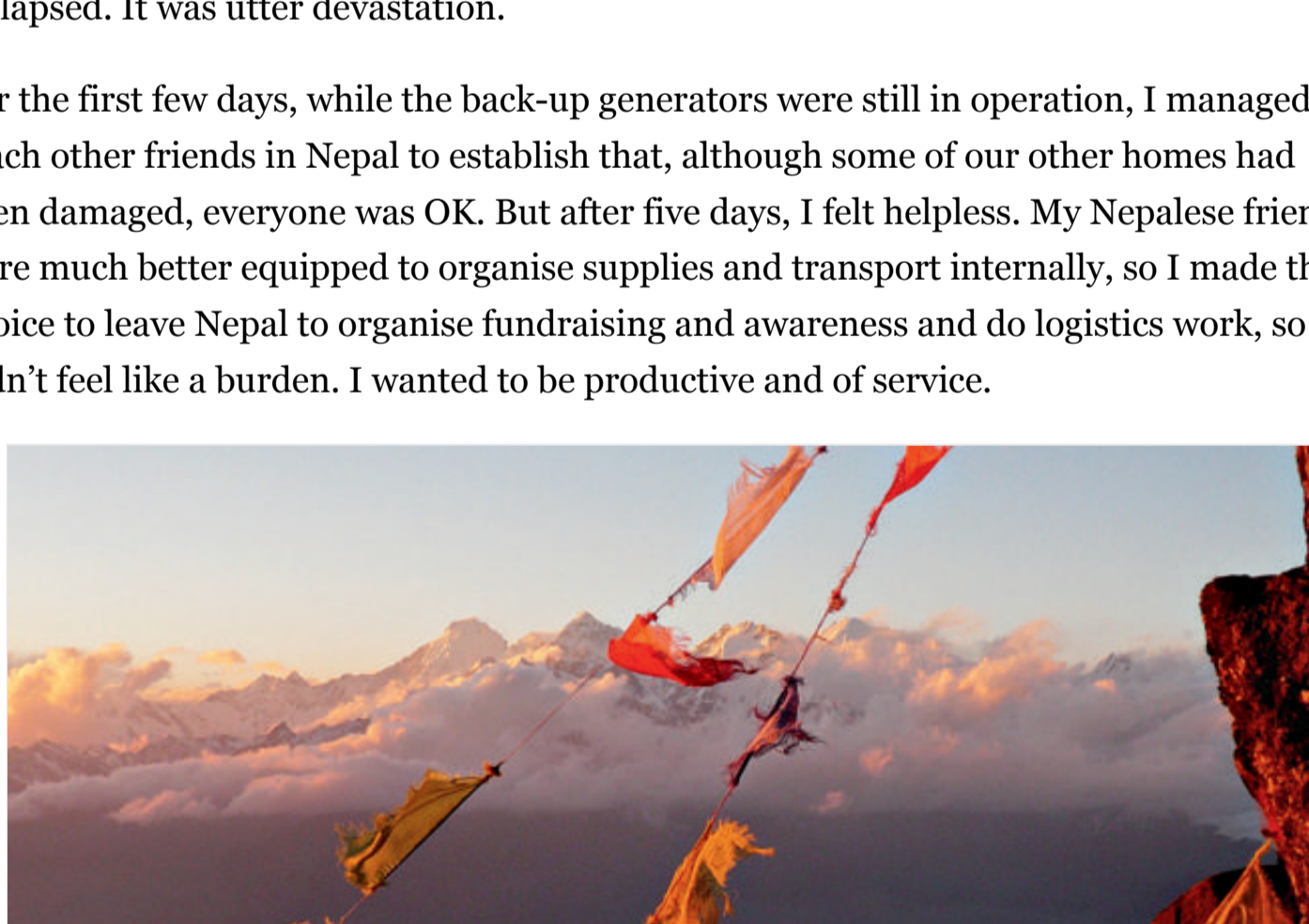
Devastation in Kathmandu, Nepal after the earthquake. Picture: Ishara S. Kodikara Source: *AFP*

After an hour or so, the shaking stopped. We knew it was imperative to get some blankets. One of the house mothers, Jamuna, and I nervously ventured back inside the house. It looked as if it had been literally picked up and shaken — everything was upside down and huge cracks stalked the walls. It was such a devastating, sinking feeling. We're a small, grassroots organisation and it had been an incredibly long journey raising funds to get it to this stage. We had all been so proud of what we had achieved. From the damage we could see before us, it was obvious we wouldn't be able to go back inside.

Back in the field, adrenaline took over. What has always inspired me about Nepal is the genuine sense of community spirit. There's a richness of spirit, generosity and human kindness that overflows in the best of times and in the worst of times. Everyone was checking on everyone else; older children comforted the younger ones, women looked after the old folk and made lots of tea, while the men used tarpaulins — usually used to wrap the harvest — to set up shelters. That night, our entire village of 55 people was living in a field — and as I later found out, so was the entire country.

The next day, once we had established the camp, I was desperate to reach our other children's homes, but communication lines were almost nonexistent. I also needed to get the word out to our support networks that we needed help. Nepal needed help. My driver, Ramesh, and I headed 40 minutes down the hill to Bhaktapur, to check on his family. The streets and fields were full of shell-shocked, bewildered people. Roads were a mess, with fallen power cables and cracks; entire blocks of buildings and homes had collapsed. It was utter devastation.

For the first few days, while the back-up generators were still in operation, I managed to reach other friends in Nepal to establish that, although some of our other homes had been damaged, everyone was OK. But after five days, I felt helpless. My Nepalese friends were much better equipped to organise supplies and transport internally, so I made the choice to leave Nepal to organise fundraising and awareness and do logistics work, so I didn't feel like a burden. I wanted to be productive and of service.



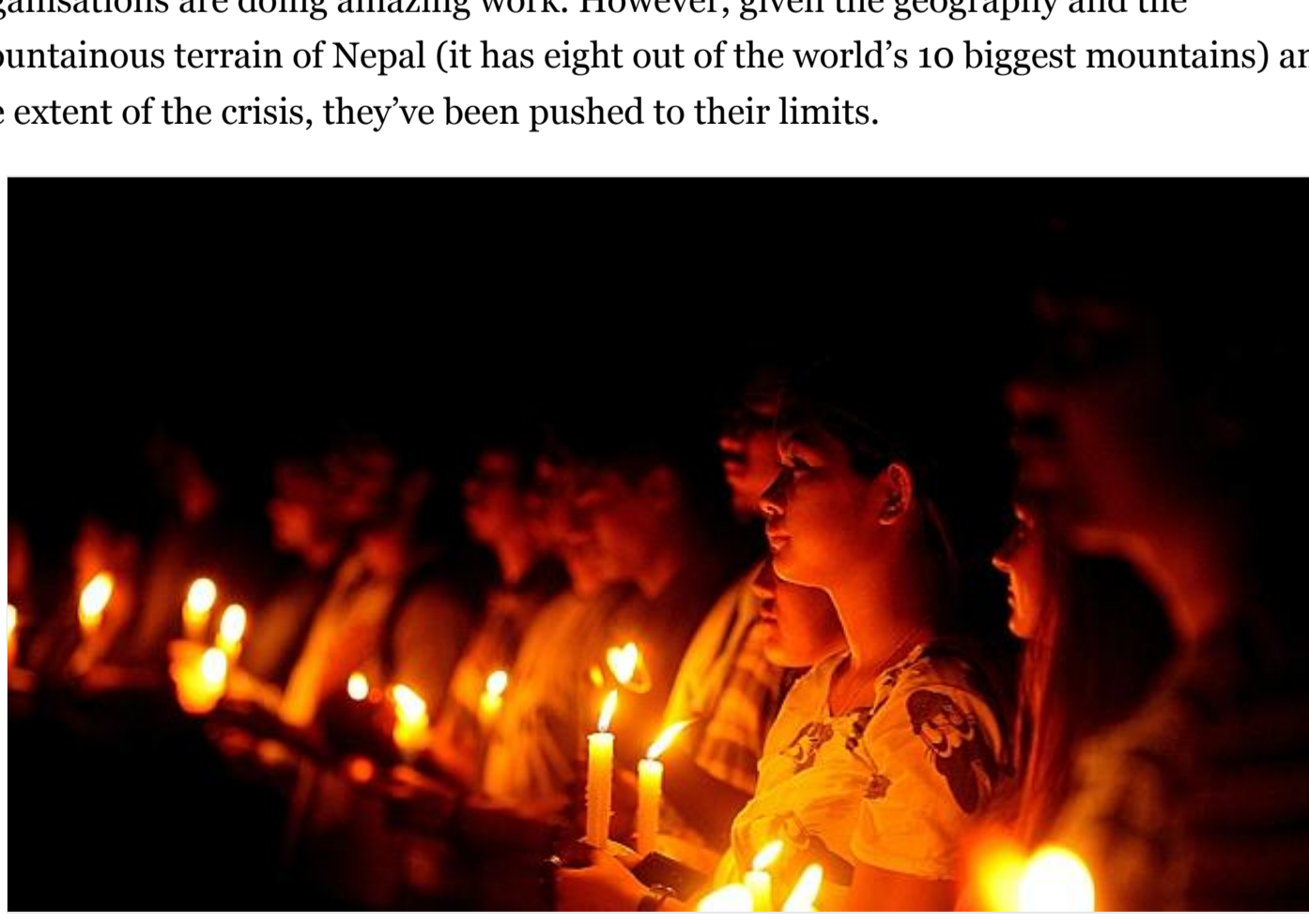
Beautiful Nepal. Picture: Kira Kay Source: *Sunday Style*

Until the second massive 7.3 earthquake struck on May 12 — which killed at least 117 people and injured 2682, bringing the total death toll from both disasters to almost 8500, with tens of thousands injured — we had hoped we could still use part of the main house, but now it's clear we can't.

We've converted the single-storey solid-brick building where we kept our buffalo, cows and goats into temporary accommodation. Additionally, we have canvases and tents. We've now ordered two dome shelters designed for refugees, one for the boys and one for the girls, which will be arriving in Nepal soon.

But we're not alone. The quake wrecked more than half a million homes, leaving nearly three million people displaced. What makes my heart race is that many of my homeless friends have moved back into their cracked houses out of necessity. And it gets worse... Soon the monsoon rains will start to lash the country, so there's going to be a lot more movement of earth and the potential for landslides is extreme. As well as the many human casualties, animals were crushed and killed, so people's livelihoods and crops and food sources have been destroyed.

The World Food Programme, Oxfam, the Red Cross and other international aid organisations are doing amazing work. However, given the geography and the mountainous terrain of Nepal (it has eight out of the world's 10 biggest mountains) and the extent of the crisis, they've been pushed to their limits.



A Nepalese candlelight memorial for the victims of the earthquakes, which killed more than 8600 people. Picture: Ishara S. Kodikara Source: *AFP*

The Nepalese are resilient, intelligent, hardworking people. Many of the villagers are already gathering the fallen pieces of their homes to create makeshift shelters. When I talk to my friends, they mostly say they are just happy to be alive. "A house can always be rebuilt," is the common refrain. Nepalese who live in cities are gathering tarps, food and generators and joining together in trucks — some are even on their motorbikes — to help reach the most affected inaccessible rural areas, where you literally have to walk in with supplies.

While Nepal needs our money to rebuild houses and infrastructure, there is also the need to rebuild livelihoods and the economy. The international community can help not only in this immediate time of emergency relief need, but also into the future — you can plan a holiday in Nepal in the next few years, or maybe arrange a volunteer working holiday, especially if you are a builder or an engineer.

Thankfully, our children are smiling and laughing again — even if they are nervous with the continued aftershocks. Their cheeky antics are gone and well once more. This, more than anything, gives me hope for the future and brings a smile to my face. With the help of our laptop, they are currently watching the Harry Potter movies to bring them some distractions — safe in the knowledge that the world cares enough to help rebuild Nepal for a better future.

As told to Lollie Barr.

To donate to help rebuild Nepal, visit handswithhands.com or redcross.org.au.

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