

Wildes in Nepal

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Featured in: Gonzaga University School of Professional Studies online newsletter
<http://blogs.gonzaga.edu/professionalstudies/we-are-the-school-of-professional-studies/>
Posted March 11, 2011

To seek an internship after you've completed your coursework is common. To travel over 7000 miles to a city located in the heart of the Himalayas to intern: uncommon. But Megan Wildes is not your ordinary intern.

"Megan has purposefully taken the more challenging road. She traveled to Nepal to learn and serve last summer," says Dr. Dale Abendroth, RN and assistant professor for Gonzaga's nursing program. "She had the interest and sought out the opportunity on her own."

This opportunity was a journey of a lifetime filled with sights and experiences for the Spokane resident. Her two passions, travel and nursing, came together at Kathmandu located in the heart of Nepal.

"I like to travel. It was my last summer in nursing school and I really wanted to work in a third world country where I felt I could use my skills and where I could see their health care and benefit from an entirely different culture," says Wildes.

From May to July, the Gonzaga nursing undergraduate spent three weeks, six days a week, interning at the Kathmandu Kanti Children's Hospital in its oncology, neonatal intensive care, and burn units. Wildes visited several other health sites in Nepal as an observer at the UMN Tansen Hospital and a Buddhist rural health clinic in Lumbini.

On her off hours, Wildes lived with a host family and took in the natural beauty of Nepal and all the surrounding mountains. She spent seven days hiking the foothills of the

world renowned Annapurna Circuit with a guide and visited one of Nepal's biggest reserves, the Chitwan National Park. During her treks, she spied wild rhinos, butterflies, monkeys, and even tiger tracks. What she couldn't get over was the breath taking views that abound in the Himalayas.

In addition to stimulus from the natural world, Wildes experienced a cultural awakening through sensory overload.

She says, "I would say it was a very cultural journey, from the sights - colorful, rickety city buildings with narrow dirt roads - to the sounds - blaring horns, howling dogs, blaring early morning devotions at the temples - to the smells - rotting garbage in the rivers and streets, spices, incense."

Accompanied by a Nepalese Buddhist monk, Wildes witnessed religious practices and devotions of the region while taking a trek through Buddhist holy places, both in Nepal and India. She visited Varanasi and Deer Park – the site of Buddha's first sermon, and Lumbini, the holy place to Buddhist and Buddha's.

Because she was traveling with a monk, Wildes was invited to stay as a guest in some of the Buddhist temple guesthouses. While there, she spoke with more monks about their lives, families, practices, and different beliefs. She discovered the local Nepali to be just as open and very friendly. As a foreigner, she found everyone to be very curious often talking to her for hours out of interest and simply to spend time.

"In their culture they will agree even if they mean no, maybe, or absolutely NEVER. Respect for elders and guests means if a guest or elder has the smallest request they will jump to take care of you, even if they actually can't do anything about it or

would be feeding you all their own dinner,” Wildes says. She explains Tibetan hospitality often means ‘A guest is god.’

But life in Kathmandu is far from Shangri-la. Wildes found that underneath the cordiality and acceptance run the vices and concerns of any big city – many of which are not openly voiced in the presence of foreigners.

She says, “Illegitimacy, infanticide, STDs, the high traffic of male workers who find seasonal work in India and get STDs and bring them home; women's rights, rape, beatings, alcoholism - they all go on underneath a very open, very friendly environment. I met a lot of Nepali who were politically critical of their government but believed all government officials were corrupt which makes sense as their system operates on bribes, so any powerful person is routinely bribed, expected to operate that way, and yet then thought of as corrupt.”

Wildes also found it to be a very different culture where you are not respected if you cannot bargain and women have far less freedom. The women usually work very hard cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children in a place of few goods and numerous hazards. If they are lucky enough to work outside of the home, it only adds to their long list of chores.

One of the biggest challenges Wildes faced while interning was lack of resources. Kanti is the only government children's hospital which means patients often wind up there when they have no where else to go. Although the oncology ward gets international support in part from the fee volunteers pay to be there, the hospital still has very little funding and supplies often run short.

Typically, children are given a free bed but parents must provide food, medicines, and routine care. A member of the family will sleep near the child or even in the same bed, feeding, washing, and checking his or her temperature. There are eight or more patients to a room plus any additional family members of patients there to care for them. Families cook, sleep, and live in the hallways.

Many times families from remote villages find the cost of caring for the child, while not working, an impossibility. They will leave before treatment is completed or stop coming in for treatments when the child appears to be getting better. As a result, many kids relapse and often die.

Shipments of supplies into Nepal are very costly and the country itself, manufactures very little. Supplies run short even on the basics hospitals take for granted in the U.S.

“I supplied my own gloves and if I did not, there were only a few pairs on the floor. There was absolutely no way to change gloves after procedures. One pair had to serve a person for a day and many nurses did not even wear those,” she says.

In addition, potable water is another precious resource in short supply in this mountainous country.

“The tap water is not safe and there is often no soap, so people don't practice basic sanitation. Hand sanitizer is used basically by a few of the doctors. There's really no such thing as true neutropenic precautions. Respiratory disease is rampant; I was exposed to TB several times and there was really nothing to do about it; the kid was in the same room with all the others,” she says. Many children in Nepal do not receive immunizations.

In spite of the challenges, Wildes knows that she has found her niche. She hopes to convey her nursing career into working internationally in communities of developing nations that can use her expertise.

“It was an amazing starter experience. The next time I want to have more professional practice behind me and go in already having a working relationship with several aid organizations. Also studying the politics of the region and situation - experience only highlighted how important it was in maintaining relationships and drinking the necessary cup of chiya (tea) that ended up sealing agreements or friendships,” she says.

Dr. Abendroth attests to her spirit, “Megan is truly an amazing young woman. I find her to be incredibly thoughtful and reflective—wise beyond her years. She has a very gentle spirit and a generous heart that reaches out for opportunities to serve the underserved and vulnerable. Megan is sensitive to the suffering of others and has the strength to fearlessly step forward as an advocate/helper.”

As for her fascinating journey, Wildes is filled with many happy memories.

She says, “I would like to return to Nepal. I'm still in contact with my host family and I had some amazing experiences with Nepali people in Kathmandu and other places. I'd love to see them again.”

Sidebar:

Talk more to Megan about her travels by contacting her at: m.wildes@hotmail.com

Word count: 1321