

# FLYING MILES TO DELIVER SMILES

POWER-Denver's Sue French Smith lends a hand to improve dental health for children in Nepal

By Jordan Gray

When thinking of Nepal, marigold-draped Buddhist stupas strung with colorful prayer flags might come to mind. You might also envision the scenic majesty of Mount Everest, its snow-capped peak flirting with the clouds.



**Hands-on and helpful.**

Sue French Smith assists with a dental procedure as a volunteer with Global Dental Relief in Nepal.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SUE FRENCH SMITH

These amazing views were part of Sue French Smith's November 2019 Kathmandu and Himalayas adventure. The POWER Cityworks consultant's trip also included a lot of smiles, some of which were far brighter after she left. That's because Sue spent part of her trip volunteering with Global Dental Relief.

"My husband, Charlie, and I thought it would be a great way to give back," Sue says.

Inspired by family friends who had worked with the organization before, the couple set out to assist with two three-day dental clinics before exploring Nepal.

#### **Free dental care for kids**

Global Dental Relief (GDR) focuses on providing free dental care for children around the world because helping kids form healthy habits when they're young is an investment in their future health. The nonprofit organization was founded in 2001 to fulfill a desperate need for dental care in a country which, at the time, had 120 dentists for a population approaching 24 million.

This clinic is open permanently, to make sure students get the ongoing dental maintenance they need, and serves several schools in the remote Kathmandu Valley.

Access to routine dental care is scarce for people in remote and sometimes roadless areas in Nepal. According to Sue, many of the children came to the clinic from local schools. Because schools aren't as common outside of cities, many students board at school throughout their education.

"Nepal is the most established of the five GDR clinics," Sue says of the clinic at Shree Mangal Dvip Boarding School where she volunteered. This clinic is open permanently, to make sure students get the ongoing dental maintenance they need, and serves several schools in the remote Kathmandu Valley.

#### **Brushing up on brushing**

Neither Sue nor her husband had dental experience beyond their own flossing and brushing. But that's not unusual among the GDR volunteers, who assist in other ways. Sue dispensed fluoride, handed out free toothbrushes and assisted the volunteer dentists by supplying the proper instruments while managing the water and suction for patients. As part of the program, older students volunteer with the GDR crew to teach younger students how to brush.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SUE FRENCH SMITH



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SUE FRENCH SMITH

#### **Little ones lining up.**

(top) Students queue up to see the dentist. The clinic saw more than 700 children while Sue was on the job.

#### **Ready, set, grin!**

(bottom) Kids ready for their dental exams. Each of them received a dental bib, a new toothbrush, and an information sheet to indicate whether they'd received previous dental treatment.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SUE FRENCH SMITH

#### Time to play.

Sue, her colleague Nehla Sangmo (second from left), and student volunteers are all smiles after receiving Sue and her husband's donation of basketballs and soccer balls.

"Over the course of the two-day clinics, we saw over 700 children," she says. "The youngest we saw was maybe 4 or 5, and then they went up to 18."

#### Patient patients

Keeping kids calm as they wait for their dental checkup isn't easy, but Sue and her team came up with a solution.

"While they were waiting, we taught them The Wave," Sue says. Lined up on benches and chairs, the dental-bibbed kids and teenagers took turns lifting their hands, holding toothbrushes and dental records, into the air. There was also a lot of giggling involved.

That's not to say the experience isn't nerve-racking for some.

"There was one girl who was having some serious work done, and I let her hold my hand," Sue says. "And she just kept holding tighter and tighter!"

Sue says that, for the most part, the kids were calm as they waited for their turn.

"They were very happy to get dental care," she says. "They know it's important. They really don't take it lightly."

For some patients, the impact of Sue and her team's work was immediate. Small cavities can turn into larger infections without

access to dental care, causing chronic pain. Sue says one patient, a girl of about 14, was quiet and wouldn't smile because she had large cavities in most of her front teeth. Dentists gave her new fillings and veneers, reducing her pain and giving her a reason to show off her pearly whites.

"That was a huge deal," Sue says. "She was calm and held my hand during the drilling. Once the procedures were done, she smiled shyly. It was really kind of a cool thing to see the change in her smile."

#### Fun and games

Sue spotted another way to help the kids when she looked out the window. Beneath the clinic, kids kicked around worn-out soccer balls and dribbled beat-up basketballs.

After asking some questions, Sue connected with Nehla Sangmo, a Nepalese colleague, about how she could donate new balls to the students. Nehla got to work with the school director, athletic director and the purchasing accountant.

"By noon the next day, the school had those new balls," Sue says. "They had a big soccer match between this school and another, and the new balls were immediately put into use. It was an incredible way to see our donation go immediately into service!"

"They were very happy to get dental care. They know it's important. They really don't take it lightly."

### Expedition to Everest.

Sue (top row, far left) and her husband Charlie (middle row, far left) joined their fellow volunteers as they explored the Everest trail and learned about local culture.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SUE FRENCH SMITH

### Giving more than dollars

Despite following her week-long stint at the clinic with a trek along the Everest Trail (see sidebar), Sue says the most meaningful part of her trip was the time spent with the students. Volunteering in person, she says, changed the way she thinks about giving back to others.

“I had made cash donations before, but had never really donated my time. It was really an awakening,” she says. “It was a great way to give back.”

“I had made cash donations before, but had never really donated my time. It was really an awakening.”

She and her husband are already thinking about how they’ll incorporate volunteerism into their next trip. As for others looking to take on this type of vacation, Sue has some advice.

“It really helps your perspective,” she says. “Go for it, you won’t be disappointed.” 🐼

*Jordan Gray is a marketing and proposal coordinator for the Facilities division. She is located in Boise.*

### A BIT OF ADVENTURE

Sue says she and her husband, Charlie, decided on the Global Dental Relief trip because they thought “it was a great combination of adventure and volunteerism.”

That adventure included a flight into Tenzing-Hillary Airport in Lukla.

“It’s supposedly the most dangerous airport in the world,” Sue says. While she says the flight was great, patience was essential. “They don’t really commit to departure times until your flight is called.”

From Lukla, it was on to the Everest trail — a trek that summits a neighboring 13,500-foot peak with a view of Everest — and the Sherpa villages along it.

“We all went out hiking,” Sue says of their volunteer-trip group. “That was pretty cool.”

The group made their way up to 13,500 feet, where they were able to view Mount Everest, Ama Dablam and other Himalayan peaks.

After a bit more sightseeing in Kathmandu, it was back home to Colorado.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SUE FRENCH SMITH

### Smiles and waves.

Children gather in the school yard outside the dental clinic.