

Last day in Nepal ❖ Mitrata (A blog article by Rachel Laidler on her experience visiting Mitrata Children Home)

On our last day here in Kathmandu, we've been lucky enough to get to visit Mitrata, a local children's home. Run by Nanda Kulu, its inspirational founder, the home provides shelter and education to some of Nepal's most vulnerable children.

Our visit today coincided with an important event for everyone at Mitrata ❖ they were moving house. And you could tell! Arriving at the home, we were greeted by a scene of industrious busyness: trucks stood at the front gates, piled high with a range of household goods; a constant stream of children, loading these items onto the trucks, flowed constantly from the main entrance of the house.

Catching sight of us, the kids called out greetings, and beckoned us inside. Conveyed up to Nanda's office, we were brought Masala tea, the older children chatting easily to Fraser and I, while the younger ones crowded round the door, smiling shyly at us. We were quickly struck by the happy atmosphere of the place ❖ it felt like we were in the midst of a family gathering, such was the affection and warmth with which the children seemed to treat one another. It was wonderful to see, and seems to be born from Nanda's life attitude. She believes that, above all else, children need love, care and guidance. The happy results of such principles speak for themselves.

Soon after we were greeted by Nanda herself. She'd been overseeing the transition from the old house to the new, and when we arrived had been in the middle of organising the latter. Her arrival had been met with happy cries from the children, who obviously adore her ❖ endearingly they call her ❖auntie❖.

Sitting down with Nanda, she began chatting about the project, from the individuals it helps to matters of fundraising.

The charity was created in 2000, from a desire to help orphaned, abandoned and underprivileged children within Nepal, providing them with a safe home, a good education, and an abundance of love and support. The name Mitrata ❖ which means friendship in Nepali ❖ epitomises this caring, compassionate message, as does their motto: ❖Children first, they are our future❖.

Nanda hopes the children will gain valuable life skills whilst at Mitrata, and that by living in a warm and loving family environment they will eventually become self sufficient members of the community, ready to aid others in their turn.

Many of the children Mitrata helps have been orphaned or abandoned. Others have parents too poor to provide for their most basic needs ❖ they simply cannot care for them. For these families Mitrata provides a welcome support base. The children are entrusted to the care of the foundation until their parents can support them.

It is often single mothers from rural areas who need this aid the most. In such cases, Nanda tells us, these women have to move from the countryside to the capital to find employment.

Isn't that difficult? I ask.

It's often better than staying in their village❖, Nanda replies. ❖They have a greater chance of employment. And it's easier ❖ in the village they work with their whole bodies; in the city, just with their hands.❖

The Mitrata foundation is fundamental in giving these women a chance to support themselves and their families. Even better, after families have been reunited, Mitrata will continue to provide the child with an education. Such actions are a true commitment to the welfare of Nepal's future generation.

While there we were privileged enough to see two families reunited, a mother and father with their daughter, and a mother with her son. It was a very humbling experience.

It is impossible to stress moreover, how important organizations like these are to such vulnerable individuals, who

appear to receive little or no help from the state. Child poverty is a major problem here. Many children have little or no access to basic means of subsistence, and there are an estimated 2.6 million child labourers in the country, a truly horrific figure. Organisations like Mitrata are often their only chance for a better future.

However, Mitrata itself is given no subsidy from the government. The foundation ♦ which is amazingly 100% volunteer run ♦ relies on sales of traditional Nepalese instruments (from a shop in Thamel) and on international donations, to support its crucial activities. Fundraising in particular is utterly essential and, as Nanda tell us, is ♦ a near constant process ♦.

But Nanda refuses to be limited by this, and has set up a trekking company to act as a new source of revenue. All profits will go directly back into Mitrata. Called Mountain Sister, it has a prides itself on being ecologically and socially responsible, and has quickly built up a positive reputation. Here, treks can be combined with visits to, or volunteering at, the children♦s♦ home. Such innovation in the face of difficult obstacles is to be applauded.

I have to admit, we are utterly in awe of Nanda. Herself a child of rural poverty, she has made it her life♦s goal to prevent children today suffering the same hardships. I♦ve met with very few people with such noble convictions, and who are as determined, committed, and positive as her. She is, quite simply, an inspiration.

But then this lady lives by a simple, but beautiful philosophy: spread kindness and you shall receive it in return.

That♦s something everyone, myself included, should remember.

If you♦d like to know more about Mitrata, visit their website at<http://www.mitratanepal.org>

To donate to the project either contact Nanda by emailing info@mitratanepal.org

or donate through **Bootstock**, a Scottish-based charity (this way Mitrata will receive gift aid too!). Find them at: <http://www.bootstock.org>

Or, if you♦re thinking about trekking in Nepal, check out the Mountain Sister website (<http://mountainsisternepal.com>).

