

Nepal: Lynn Knauff '70

Paying the Corps Back

In 1965, Lynn Knauff was 29, in Hawaii and in the middle of a divorce when she met some of the first volunteers to return from a new kind of public service.

Knauff had grown up in a community-minded family in New Jersey, where dinner conversations revolved around “people not getting a fair deal, and my parents working on correcting the problem. I was a teenager, and I was a little embarrassed, but they taught me to speak up.”

She was among the sixth group of Peace Corps volunteers — and one of the first two women — sent to Nepal, which had opened to the rest of the world in 1954. She was sent first to Calcutta and told to mix with the beggars, get to know South Asia.

Knauff found in Nepal an isolated paradise, parts of which had never seen a white person, much less a white woman. “The women didn’t know if I was a man or a woman,” she recalled, “so they asked if they could look up my skirt.”

Knauff’s job was to help train these women in literacy, home crafts and child care. She traveled into villages with Nepali counterparts, setting up programs to teach women to read and write and take precautions against illness.

Some of the village elders refused her offer — they didn’t share her goal of improving the status of Nepali women. She taught some of the women to read and write by lantern light.

She lived in three rooms with a mud-floor kitchen. There was no running water, and her daily diet consisted of two rice meals. She walked two miles to and from work each day.

She made friends with her Nepali counterparts, one about her age, which was beyond Nepali marrying age, the other connected to exiled royalty. Together they worked to improve conditions for women in their small section of Nepal.

Knauff returned to the United States in 1968 committed to women’s public health, and in 1970 she received her master of public health degree from UNC. She had heard about the program while in Nepal. In late 1978, Knauff found herself back in Nepal as country director for the Peace Corps, with 135 volunteers and 20 Nepali and American staff under her wing.

The Nepal she’d known in the 1960s had changed dramatically. The country had opened to tens of thousands of tourists. But Knauff had changed, too. This time, she came with an agenda.

“I felt very much at home. Because of the poor



Lynn Knauff, at right, talks with U.S. embassy officials at an air strip in Pokhara.

health status of Nepalis, I wanted to increase secondary projects among volunteers, promoting health activities as part of their primary assignment.”

Nepal was considered a hard country for volunteers because of constant threats to health, few diversions, a limited diet and geographic isolation. Knauff sought suggestions from volunteers and Peace Corps staff and put into place a permanent counseling service for volunteers. To improve medical services, she recruited the incoming physician spouse of a USAID senior officer soon after her arrival in Katmandu.

She also increased mail communications between the Peace Corps office and volunteers and put out the word that volunteers weren’t expected to tough it out during serious bouts of illness and depression. Initial training and in-service training directly addressed health promotion and prevention of illness as well as stress management techniques.

After returning to Chapel Hill in 1981, she was deputy director of the International Training in Health program until 2000. Today she is semi-retired, working part time for UNC’s WorldView, an international program for educators; and she encourages students and people who think they’re ready to retire to consider the corps. ■

— Susan Byrum Rountree '79



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