

54-year old mother of 3 and grandmother, qualified midwife and practicing postnatal doula, Naomi, applied in July 2008 for a volunteer placement in Naxal Orphanage, Kathmandu, Nepal.



“I have always worked in the caring profession: house mother in adult community, massage therapist, auxiliary nurse in maternity unit, midwife, school nurse, postnatal doula.

“I have loads of experience working with babies, toddlers and children of all ages and I felt I could offer a lot as a volunteer. I wanted to give freely my skills and care in an environment that has been specifically set up to satisfy a huge demand for voluntary support. By this I mean that my usual work as a postnatal doula is mostly in the wealthy sector

and although I know I am much valued I wanted to have the opportunity of working in a completely different environment which would widen my own perspective and life experience.

“So I did a web search, found *people and places*, completed my application in July 2008, and thus began my preparations for my trip to Nepal in February 2009. I’d already talked about my ideas with my husband and family, and they were all absolutely right behind me!

“It’s a good thing I started making enquiries so far ahead of when I wanted to go – there was so much information, so much to do, so many people to talk with ...

“During the next 6 months, I had numerous phone calls with Kate at *people and places*, and was also introduced to lots of previous Naxal volunteers. To begin with, I had no plans as such about what I would do – I just wanted to give of myself and my experience – but gradually I began to realise that I could actually help to make a lasting difference! I read reports from previous volunteers and in talking with some of them and with Kate, I could see how I could leave something of myself and my experience behind. The didis (big sisters) and orphanage staff would be working with me and we could share our knowledge and experience with each other ... I really started to look forward to my month in Nepal!

“One of my questions was ‘where shall I stay?’ so I talked it through with Kate, and she sent me this note from Edwina, a volunteer who had stayed with Mr Haribol & his family. (Mr Haribol is the deputy director of Naxal):

*“They told me you asked about the homestay so here’s my experience: Family are all very welcoming, the sons and one of the daughter-in-laws (Susmita) speak good English, so we get along very well and they help translate if needed, although I’m also learning some Nepali by speaking with them. Haribol ji shares his books with me – it’s a nice and cosy room to relax in when I come home from the orphanage. It’s a 20 minute walk from the house to the Orphanage, so not too far to walk and I’m finding it very good exercise. It’s great to experience the Nepali way of life by staying at a homestay – I’m glad I didn’t choose a hotel.”*

“... so that settled it – I really wanted to immerse myself in local life and there couldn’t be a better choice for me!

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“Then I started to get to know other volunteers who would be working in Nepal at the same time as me – not many, because as Kate explained (and was very obvious once I arrived) there really isn’t room for more than 3 or 4 at a time ... and besides, it wouldn’t feel right if there were too many of us! This is from Chris, another 50-something volunteer, a few months before our journey:

*“I understand that we will be volunteers together at Naxal and thought that it would be good to get to know each other a little. I may have the advantage of you in that I looked you up on the internet and so know something of your background already. It looks like we probably come from opposite ends of the spectrum as far as experience goes but hopefully that means that we will complement each other well. My experience with children is abysmally lacking but I am willing to be of use in the orphanage wherever I can be. It will probably be a steep learning curve for me!”*

“The last few weeks flew by – preparations at home included careful planning and packing of the suitcase of course, but I also continued to talk with volunteers and with Kate, and of course with the local team in Kathmandu who would be ‘looking after me’. This is what the orphanage asked me to do: *‘Naomi can give or share her ideas regarding the babies with the didis, and can also give some knowledge about the First Aid care (that helps the children) to the nurses. In other time, she can play with the babies and children/toddlers.’*

“And so off I went! The travelling is of course very much a part of any such trip, but a flight is a flight ... not much to say about that really. When I arrived, I was met by a smiling friendly face – Nima who runs the local team – and we drove to my new home for a month. I immediately felt so welcomed – in a reserved and Nepali way ... but more of my out-of-work experiences later.

Day one of going to work: As I had seen some pictures of the orphanage before my visit I already had some idea of the conditions to expect. As I approached it I was impressed by the smart exterior, then as I was shown around the back it was a completely different story – the building was badly dilapidated in places. My experience of caring for babies in the UK has been in immaculately clean maternity units or in clean, well equipped homes – I was going to have to make some mental adjustments!.

“Before arriving in Nepal that I pictured myself being given responsibility for ‘lots’ of small newly orphaned babies. The situation was different... There were 43 children. The youngest infant was 9 months in a group of 10 toddlers up to approx 2. There are 2 ‘didi’s’ [women who care, as mothers, for the orphans] in charge of the 10 little ones, they are with them 24 hours a day and have full responsibility for their needs. ... My initial reaction was ‘what can I do here?’ They are so capable and cope admirably. So for the first few days I observed their routine and tried to find ways that I could ‘help’ or lessen their load. I saw how they washed them with wet cotton wool, never bathed, and then massaged all over, very vigorously with mustard oil. The babies appeared to really enjoy this firm touch compared to the very light massage performed on our babies in the west – I imagine it made them feel secure. At first I felt uncomfortable as my way was so different and I saw the ‘didi’s’ giggling at my delicate touch. So I decided to follow their method realising that it was an effective technique which the babies thoroughly enjoyed.

“In my ‘work’ with babies I always instinctively give my all i.e cuddling, hugging, calming and settling. This experience was immediately challenged when it was explained to me that the didis prefer if we don’t favour one child. So I soon learnt to ‘unpeel’ them from me and share the attention. Once they got to know me they would ‘bomb’ me as soon as I entered the nursery, this was really unsettling so I discovered that if I brought with me something new and distracting, like a basket of bricks borrowed from the older kids, they would play really happily.

“Another VERY noticeable difference was the early introduction to potty training. Every morning they were placed on a potty and left there until they performed. I was totally amazed to only see 2 poo’s in nappies in 4 weeks!

“In the mornings the babies would play on the roof area. To get there they had to negotiate dangerous chipped steps, open banisters and uneven ground. Some of them were only barely walking, however they were all so careful and given this opportunity had learnt to be sure footed. On arriving at the roof area they would constantly be leaning over and trying to climb the low wall. I was initially shocked and wondered why it wasn’t made safer. When I suggested this they were shocked and said ‘why?’ as they were there to constantly watch over them. I felt a bit bad, as if I had insulted their responsibility. This highlighted our health and safety paranoia in the west. ...

“... Despite being at the orphanage every day I managed to have a huge variety of other memorable experiences. I know my decision to stay with a Nepalese family really enriched my experience. I lived as a respected member of their family, ate their food, tolerated the Nepalese style toilet, shared their lifestyle, culture, religion, yoga. I was invited to a wedding, traditional dance performance, got taken to the best local shopping markets. ... I was also very honoured to be invited by the presidents of the charity to travel to 3 remote areas where they’re running a literacy project for women. I was a ‘guest’ speaker and was overwhelmed by their commitment and determination. I also trekked 3 hours to a remote community where they’re providing an eye clinic. They invite all local people in the surrounding area to be screened for cataracts and provide transport to the eye hospital in Kathmandu where they have the operation (no charge) – an incredible life changing opportunity for these people.

“The Nepalese are the most kind, generous and loving people I have ever encountered. I had the most wonderful and rewarding time and was showered with gifts, garlands and thanks on my departure. Although I tried not to get too emotionally attached to the babies I still wept when I left.”