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Helping hands

Building a future for Nepal

● ROZ PULLEY

A TEAM of Cairns volunteers will head to Nepal in the New Year on what could be the first of many missions from the city to the Himalayan village of Batase.

Led by former Nepalese child slave Som Tamang – who now lives in Cairns and founded the humanitarian organisation Friends of Himalayan Children – the volunteers will teach at schools, live with villagers and take donations of clothing, books and school stationery.

Since arriving in Cairns several years ago, Som has used his own savings to buy land in his home village of Batase, build a school for 85 students, a hostel for orphaned school children and buy a hostel for high school students in a neighbouring town.

Now, he will get the chance to show his efforts to educate some of Nepal's poorest to those who have helped his Cairns-based charity.

“I'm really excited. I'm going to be able to show them the work I've achieved there since I started and since the charity started. Nobody has seen it, so these people are the first to see what we have done there,” Som said.

“The other thing I would like is their observations on what is most needed there – for example, a toilet



BUILDING A FUTURE: Rusty's Market stall holder and Friends of Himalayan Children founder Som Tamang (centre), with Michelle Truman and Peter Hodgson, who will join him on a visit to Nepal, where he is building a school (right) for children in his home village. Main picture: JAKE NOWAKOWSKI

– and then we want to work on that project when we come back here. They're also going to be teaching at the school.”

Michelle Truman of Kuranda said a visit to Nepal two years ago had changed her life.

“They're just the most beautiful people, the most beautiful children. I wanted to do something other than be a tourist the next time.”

Michelle and another friend are planning to spend 4-6 weeks in Batase teaching at the school Som built. “The key to changing anyone's life is education,” she

said. “I'm taking books, maps of the world, pictures of the Great Barrier Reef – Nepal is a landlocked country. I know the things I contribute will be minimal compared to how much I'll gain.

“It's a shock to go to a country like Nepal, but it's actually a bigger shock to then come back to Australia. You go to a country like Nepal and everybody's smiling, their hearts are open. You come back to Australia and everybody's watching *Neighbours*, worrying about what Britney Spears is wearing. It's a very different world.”

James Cook University student Peter Hodgson, 19, said he was keen to see the work of the charity he had helped set up. “Ever since I've been working with the charity and helping with the children, I wanted to see them and be with (Som's) family. I'll visit the hostel the charity owns, do some work on the hostel, go to the schools, teach there, meet Som's family and go with Som's brother to do some hiking in the lower-lying lands.”

To make a donation to Friends of Himalayan Children, phone 4053 7544 or 0439 782 563.



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