

IMMEASURABLY More



Today Sita's face radiates with joy and her smile brightens any room, but it hasn't always been that way. When she was fifteen years old, Sita fell from a tree while collecting firewood, and suffered a spinal cord injury which left her completely paralysed from the waist down. For almost two years she was treated for complications in four different hospitals in Kathmandu, and her life often hung in the balance.

In one of these, Patan Hospital, she experienced God's love through caring Christian staff. Sita remembers one missionary in particular who used to visit the children's ward to share toys and Christian literature. When Sita was critically ill, this woman donated her blood, and Sita never forgot this. At the age of 17, she was admitted to the Ryder Cheshire Home in Kathmandu for a 10 month tailoring program, intended to equip disabled adults with skills to earn their own living. By this time her heart was open and sensitive to spiritual things.

I was serving with the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) at that time, and was working as a physiotherapist one day a week at the Ryder Cheshire Home, training a Nepali physio assistant. Although the Nepali staff were Hindus, they were aware that the UMN volunteers were Christians, and even allowed us to share the true meaning of Christmas with the patients at Christmas time. When Sita and another resident heard that I was attending special women's meetings at Patan church, they asked if they could join me. This was Sita's first experience in church and her heart was touched, and over the following months our friendship continued to grow.

After completing her training, Sita and three others set up a tailoring shop in Kathmandu, with the hope of becoming financially self-supporting. But their dreams were dashed when one morning, upon opening up their shop, they discovered they had been robbed of their sewing machines and all the fabric and saris their customers had entrusted to them. After that, Sita had no choice but to return home to her village, to live with her father and stepmother.

Traditionally in Nepal people with disabilities were hidden away at home, and often deprived of medical care, as there was such low value placed on their lives. However, since we first moved to Nepal in 1984 I have noticed a significant change in attitude towards the disabled. There are more resources available now (like wheelchairs) so the disabled community is far more visible on the streets. People's attitudes are also much more accepting. Unfortunately, though, things have been slower to change in the villages.

After the robbery, Sita lived in the village for about three years, but found it increasingly frustrating. Life was a struggle, not only physically but financially as well, despite her skill at tailoring and handicrafts. She felt very confined, as the rocky roads made it difficult to get around by wheelchair, and even the simplest action such as toileting was a problem, since Nepali homes have squat toilets, which paraplegics cannot use. She disliked being so dependent on others,

and feeling she was a burden to them.

While living in the village, Sita would join in with the Hindu festivals to please her family, but was secretly praying and reading her Bible. Then in 2000, after being admitted to INF's Green Pastures Hospital and Rehabilitation Centre for physio treatment and further training, Sita made a commitment to follow Christ. Surprisingly her family did not oppose her decision, as her father had always maintained that it was the prayers of Christians that saved her life in the early months after her injury.

It was during her 15 months at Green Pastures that Sita caught a vision for encouraging and coming alongside others with disabilities. By then I was back in Canada – our family had left Nepal in 1999 – but I kept in touch with Sita by the occasional letter or email. Her letters were full of joy, and she was so thankful to God for what He was doing in her life. She moved to Pokhara and became active in a local church, and was even baptised in a tank that had been specially designed for her.

The last letter I received from Sita was in 2004, and in it she shared her heart's desire to become a Christian counsellor, so that she could be an encouragement to others with long-term disabilities. But it seemed an impossible goal: not only was she confined to a wheelchair, but

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she only had a Year 8 education.

In 2007, my husband and I returned to Nepal, this time with the International Nepal Fellowship (INF). I brought Sita's last letter with me, hoping to somehow make contact with her. Then, amazingly, several days before our first trip to Pokhara we received an email update from the Medical Superintendent at Green Pastures Hospital, announcing the appointment of a new peer counsellor: it was Sita! It was with great delight that we were reunited later that week at Green Pastures, and we both found ourselves giving thanks to the God who is able "to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20). Neither of us had ever imagined that one day we

would be working together in the same Christian organisation.

Sita then shared with me amazing stories of how God had provided for her in recent years, and how He'd taken her from being a patient at Green Pastures to working full-time for INF. It had begun with informal opportunities to counsel others while she was still a patient, then continued for the two years she was employed by a spinal cord injury association where she helped with tailoring training. After that Green Pastures invited her to be a volunteer counsellor one day a week.

God had also provided a secure, suitable living arrangement for her. Disabled people in Nepal often struggle to find appropriate wheelchair-accessible housing with toilet and shower facilities, but Sita, along with one or two other disabled adults, lived in a house provided by an elderly Japanese friend.

Wheelchair-accessible, and with a Western-style toilet (as opposed to the squat style), this home

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Sita was the first Nepali person with a disability to go paragliding, and found it very enjoyable.

has been a haven for Sita and her friends, and is a source of blessing to many who visit.

In addition, this Japanese friend enabled Sita to attend a six-week peer counsellor training in Japan, and, after three years of volunteer counselling at Green Pastures, Sita applied for the full-time paid position as peer counsellor.

It has been a privilege for me to watch Sita interacting with patients on the wards and the rehab department at Green Pastures Hospital. As she wheels alongside a hospital bed, her head is just about level with the patient's head on the pillow. When a patient shares their sorrow with her, she is able to say, "I understand," in a way that able-bodied staff cannot. Honest sharing of her own





company said it would be too dangerous, but one of the pilots was willing to take me. I was nervous at first, but I thought 'If I don't try, others won't try', and then I discovered it was easy and very enjoyable. It gave me a wonderful sense of freedom floating through the air. And I thought that if I am successful, it will mean success for other people with disabilities." And indeed, it was a huge encouragement to many disabled people, and was widely covered in the media.

Does Sita feel she has a rich and full life? Yes, very much so. "Sometimes I wonder if I am living a real life or only dreaming. I am so thankful to God for the opportunities He has given me to fulfill my vision of encouraging

others with disabilities. He has opened so many doors for me. This is not of my own doing. I have a deep love for people with disabilities and I'm able to understand their problems. I experience God's grace in every moment of my life. I know my soul is safe and He gives me physical health as well."

Sita continues to marvel at all that God has done in her life and waits expectantly to see what 'immeasurably more' plans He has for her future. ☺

Carol Stevens and her husband David are Canadian Interserve partners, who have served in Nepal for almost 18 years. Photos: INF (www.inf.org).

struggles brings hope and comfort to patients and their families as they observe that it is possible to live a rich and full life from a wheelchair.

Last year Sita proved that she had plenty of surprises left up her sleeve, when a photo of her made it on to the front page of one of the large Nepali newspapers, boldly captioned with "Paraplegic takes to Paragliding". And sure enough, there was a photo of Sita landing at the lakeshore in Pokhara, having just become the first Nepali person with a disability to go paragliding. Once again she had demonstrated her desire to live life to the full and to encourage others to do the same.

"When I saw others paragliding, I wished I could try," she told me. "The paragliding

