

'My day-care changes lives'

By Valeska Hovener



Photo: Bina Basnet and her day-care children ©Valeska Hovener

"Where are we from: Nepal! Who are we: Nepali!" Twenty little faces look at the door opening. They all smile as Bina Basnet (42) shouts out the two most important questions that are taught in the Orchid Garden Nepal. "I believe that when a young child is proud of their identity, they will do good things for their country and become good people." Basnet (or Bina 'Didi') is the founder of the Orchid Garden Nepal, a day-care for children whose parents are extremely poor and work hard in order to make a small living. Often they cannot provide the basic needs for their offspring.

Basnet has always loved kids 'from the beginning', as she puts it. She began working at an orphanage in Balmandir where for seven years she would notice the same reoccurring problems. "Every time when a parent would drop off their child they were crying. They did not want to give up their child, but they had to. They simply could not provide food or look after them during the day." Seeing this pattern in her head over and over again and knowing that most of the children die before the age of five, Basnet decided she had to do something.

Underprivileged kids

At times she took children in just for the day to watch over them and feed them properly and her idea of a day-care began to take shape. "But I did not have the confidence yet to move forward with my dream," Basnet says. Therefore, she took a trip to India to complete a three months inclusive education course (CII-training) and returned to Nepal, determined to turn her life goal into a reality. On the first of August 2006, Basnet started her project. With the help of sponsors she managed to develop the Orchid Garden into a safe haven for underprivileged kids that are socially and economically deprived.

Today, the Orchid Garden watches over hundred and eighty children between the ages of eight months to eleven years old, from eight o'clock in the morning until six at night. Sixty-three kids have already moved to a private school sponsored by Orchid Garden. Four youngsters have had an operation done from money that Basnet collected. "Imagine we started off with fifteen children. Now I have a waiting list of twenty more youngsters," Basnet says with a twinkle in her eye.



Photo: the children are being schooled on a daily basis ©Valeska Hovener

Pre-primary school

Apart from the day-care, the place also provides a pre-primary school where they teach: English, Nepali, mathematics, art and social skill classes. "We teach them how to love and respect their community and parents. Work hard, no alcohol and always think positive."

For most of these children this type of thinking is often not practiced in their homes. There they suffer from malnutrition, domestic violence with no room to play or sleep. The lunch they receive at the day-care is often their only meal of the day. "When a little one comes here for the first time he or she wears filthy clothes and is heavily underfed. After three months you do not recognize them anymore, they are clean and healthy. Good health provides a good mind," Basnet explains.

Although she is confronted with devastating stories, Basnet has found her own way of staying strong. "Sometimes I cry over individual cases, but I believe in and empower the children. If I do not intervene, their destiny would be a life on the street. With my help they can outgrow their environment and the many generations that follow after them. Instead of becoming a criminal or addicted to glue."

Prostitute

When the six-month-old infant, Naresh came to the Orchid Garden, his mother worked as a prostitute and his father had left them when he was not born yet. "She asked me, please ma-am, can you look after my boy? She claimed that she worked in a restaurant, but I always verify the things they tell me," Basnet says.

After a parent fills in an application form, Basnet listens to their dreadful life stories. She then visits their homes and does research around the neighbourhood. In Naresh's case, Basnet found out that his mother was prostituting herself in order to keep her and the baby alive. "Straight away I looked after Naresh for

her. My day-care is free of charge for those who cannot afford it. As a consequence of that, the mother found the strength to open a small vegetable shop.”



Photo: This is how poor children grow up; often their parents are drunks ©Valeska Hovener

Unsupervised

However, the day-care alone turned out to not be enough when the ten year old Gita revealed an alarming story to Basnet. “Some of the neighbourhood boys that live on the same street found that three girls were living unsupervised at home in the night. Their mother would not come home from work until late and their father was absent. They took advantage of them by sexually abusing the oldest twelve-year-old girl. Because she had no idea what the boys were doing, she convinced her little sisters to also take part in the abuse. When Gita came to me, I immediately took them in.”

This incident made Basnet aware of the problems at night. Three months ago this evolved into a girls’ hostel located next to the Orchid Garden where they are being protected. The hostel houses seven girls with many more to come. Basnet explains, “one night I received a phone call from a mother who sounded terrified on the phone. She begged me to come over and protect her from her physically abusive husband. I phoned the police and decided to put their fourteen-year-old daughter Kritika into my hostel. The girl suffered a lot from the mental torture of her father. Now she is doing great at school, being the first in her class.”

Hard labour

The Orchid Garden will accept every poor child that is in need of help. The one-year-old Santi lived together with five other people in a tiny place. Because the mother was involved in hard labour they tied the child to a chair the entire day. Without any sunlight, food or water, the girl had to survive by herself. “Some of the neighbours would throw some biscuits through the fence. When I opted to take Santi to the Orchid Garden, the child would not stop crying for three months because of her young traumatic experiences. For our team, Santi was a big challenge,” Basnet states.

These stories are more the rule than the exception. However, this does not discourage Basnet to give up on her ideology of a society where all children, despite of their caste or class, are entitled to a safe environment with equal opportunities. Basnet: “I want to change the way people think. When I opened the

Orchid Garden, the owner of the house was against it because she did not want poor children around her house. After six months she was surprised to see what a beautiful place we created.”

Single mothers

To Basnet every kid has the right to be protected even if his or her parents sell plastic from garbage or are drunk all day. Twenty per cent of the parents are single mothers whose husbands have passed away, left them for other women or hit the street because of their abusive nature. “I developed a special program that teaches mothers how to deal with their children. One of the mothers used to beg on the streets, now she works for a human rights organization. This is how my day-care changes lives.”