

woman at work ■

WOW

DR ANTONIA NEUBAEUR

READ (Rural Education and Development)
founder and chairman of the board



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A WORLD

FULL OF BOOKS AND MORE!

“We were lying in a grassy field above the runway at the end of a perfect trek in east Nepal, waiting for a plane to arrive to return us to Kathmandu. My clients started to hand me a tip. “Domi,” I asked our Nepali sirdar, a good friend of mine, “if you could do anything in your village, what would you like?” Domi thought for a while. Then he said, “I’d like to build a library in Junbesi.” In the fall of 1991, eight porters carried 900 books and a card catalogue over the 11,800-foot Lamajura Pass into the tiny town of Junbesi in the Solukhumbu district of Nepal. In May of 1992, the Junbesi Library was dedicated before 100 villagers and guests. Since that time, 35 libraries have been built from literally one end of Nepal to the other. Each library has several thousand books in Nepali, a card catalogue, a children’s section, a trained librarian and a sustaining project to support operations.”

Career profile

- Founder and Chairperson of the Board of READ
- President of Myths and Mountains, Inc., a cultural adventure travel company.
- A former language teacher and educational researcher, she directed a major study on literacy in Philadelphia.
- Served as a consultant to the Lilly Endowment and the U.S. Department of Education.
- Served on and chaired many boards including the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition.

This is a story of a woman who saw that literacy was a luxury in Nepal, a country among the poorest and least developed in the world with less than 40 percent of residents considered literate (defined as a third grade reading level) and 90 percent of its population residing in rural settings tucked into the mountainous landscape, most without libraries. A woman who first came to Nepal in 1983 on a trekking expedition amongst her many travels throughout Southeast Asia and Asia she confesses she “fell in love with the people here” and that instant spark of an idea to open a library

by Domi was what started READ. Almost a decade later READ today has 35 self-supporting community centers with libraries at their hub opening the minds and hearts of thousands of Nepalis. Four more libraries are scheduled for development in 2005. READ Nepal, today is run by Nepali management with support from their US Board of Directors, Advisory Committee, Nepali Advisory Board, literacy partners and innumerable volunteers. Dr Antonia on the other hand lives in America with her family continuing

Why libraries especially with so many organisations working on literacy in Nepal?

Nepal is a country with less than 40 percent literacy rate, and even less for women. Schools rarely have electricity and often don't have benches and desks, much less books. Although individuals and organisations are working in Nepal to train people to read, few villages with literacy classes have materials for people to study when classes finish. Also research on literacy suggests that if there is no opportunity for people to continue reading after training, and no follow-up, literacy retention is very low. Groups also build schools in villages and give scholarships to special students. But in a country with 26 million people, one school or one scholarship is like a bandage on a ruptured aorta. Moreover there is no government-supported public library system, nor are there any plans or budget for developing one. A shortage of books and other learning resources leaves generations of Nepali to repeat the cycle of illiteracy.

Where does READ build its libraries?

Knowing that villagers typically resent suggestions from foreigners, READ waits for communities to approach. Thus, sites are self-selecting. A site is rejected only if READ finds it lacks local leadership to effectively oversee the project, secondary schools and a community that is willing and able to support a library after completion. The entire project is in the hands of the villagers, although READ makes frequent visits to the sites. Villagers are responsible for developing a proposal; setting a time line; estimating costs; selecting a committee that is ethnically, politically

and sexually diverse; having a patron to oversee the process; choosing their librarian, and supporting the library after completion. Villagers develop their own charter, open bank accounts, select sites, design and supervise the construction and select the librarians.



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What kinds of books are available in your libraries?

Books of children's stories, Nepali literature, history, science, agriculture, business, and medicine serve preschoolers, school and college students and adults. In Jhapa, for example, the library can serve 5,000 students alone as well as adults and young children. In essence, if one wants to have literacy, there must be something to read. Libraries provide that

"something" to large numbers of rural Nepalis.

How does READ libraries sustain in the long run?

The critical element in the READ approach is micro funding - the development of an income-generating project to sustain the library once it's in operation. The nature of the project is determined by community need and geographical location. For example, Phidim built their library over a series of stores. The rent from the stores goes to support the library. Tukche chose to build a lumber mill, Jhuwami and Pakribas launched ambulance services, and Palewas installed a telephone service. Rental of storefront shops - often housed in the first floor of the library is a particularly popular revenue generator. Other examples are ambulance services, telecommunication centers, printing services and furniture factories. Often these projects raise

considerably more than library operations require and these funds are channeled back into the community for needed services such as childcare centers, health clinics, literacy centers and infrastructure improvements. Unlike traditional foreign aid, which typically breeds dependence, the READ model cultivates independence and community empowerment.

What has been READ's greatest achievement?

In the course of cultivating a rural library network in Nepal, READ has established the Nepal Community Library Association and organised an annual National Reading Campaign helping to build a market of readers and nurturing business for Nepali authors, publishers and printers. READ is also coordinating the National Writing Contest. READ libraries have had a wide-reaching impact on local communities, providing jobs for librarians, construction workers and

others as well as creating income to support community services. They have created "zones of peace" where villagers can come to debate critical issues and learn about strategies for peace in a country where conflict is

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currently rampant. In essence, these community centers and libraries become the nexus for community economic, educational and social growth. Libraries also help business. A network of libraries makes translating and printing books in Nepali profitable, provides a market of

readers for aspiring writers, and makes publishing worthwhile.

What are your future plans for READ?

Provide LAN (Local Area Network) and access to Internet in our libraries for rural people for better communication and access to knowledge.

What do you wish for in life?

I want to see READ grow, travel to as many countries as possible and one day even hope to write a book on my innumerable travels where I've shared many special moments with so many fantastic people.

For further information
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