



Toni Neubauer (EdD '81) in Nepal, with friends

A friend in READ

By DAVID MCKAY WILSON

TONI NEUBAUER (EdD '81) first visited Nepal in 1983. And with that trip, Neubauer's plans, and her life, changed. After her first trip to Nepal, a rugged nation roughly the size of Iowa, she began studying Nepali.



MYTHS AND MOUNTAINS, Neubauer's travel company, has also been quite successful. It has taken travelers on trips to 129 countries on seven continents, including Antarctica. In 2009, National Geographic Adventure named it "One of the 10 Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth." At 66, Neubauer, who lives in Incline Village, Nevada, on Lake Tahoe's north shore, has no intention of stopping any time soon. This spring, she traveled to Nepal for three weeks with travel writer Everett Potter to dedicate two new libraries and visit two already in operation.

"I believe that retirement is doing what you want, when you want," says Neubauer, who keeps in shape hiking the 168-mile Tahoe Rim Trail, or riding on horseback across the Tibetan Plateau in Nepal. "I happen to love what I do. When you send people on a trip, it changes lives. It keeps me young. And I can't imagine not doing it."

Neubauer, who grew up outside of New York City, was always drawn to foreign languages. At Tufts University, she majored in French, and she later earned a master's in French literature at New York University. From 1967 to 1979, she taught foreign languages, and she began her doctoral studies at Loyola in educational administration in 1977.

Neubauer is now fluent in Nepali (as well as five other languages), which is rare for a Westerner. In 1988, she left education to start an adventure travel company. The company, Myths and Mountains, promised travelers an immersion in a country's culture, discovering its religions and holy sites, investigating folk medicine and traditional healing, and learning about its wildlife and the environment.

At the end of a trek to Nepal in that same year, Neubauer asked one of the trip's porters what he would do for his village, if he could pick any one thing. His answer was that he'd build a library.

That answer put the wheels in motion for Neubauer, the educator, who quickly realized how a library could serve as a community hub in these remote villages. In 1991, she started a nonprofit organization, READ Global, to help build such libraries. That year, eight porters carried 900 books and a card catalog over the 11,800-foot Lamajura Pass into the tiny village of Junbesi. But Neubauer knew that raising money to build the library wasn't enough. She'd seen too many projects financed by foreign aid that were abandoned not long after the aid dried up.

She wanted a library that could sustain itself. So she developed a model, in which the library was built in collaboration with a private business whose profits could provide income for the library. In one

village, it's a furniture factory; in another, an ambulance service and health center. Another project has 11 storefronts to rent out to various businesses and fully sustain and support the entire library complex.

Additionally the libraries offer pre-schools, medical services, microcredit, computer, and other services to the communities. Since 1991, READ Global has built 48 libraries in Nepal. Each library has about 3,500 books in the native language, computers with Internet access, and meeting rooms for literacy classes and training for local entrepreneurs.

"We make it clear to the villages where we build the libraries—we deliver a baby but we don't raise the child," says Neubauer.

The libraries have become so embedded in the fabric of life in some villages that they also served as "peace zones" during Nepal's civil war, which raged from 1996 to 2006. At a time when other non-government organizations were fleeing, READ Global remained in Nepal.

"The Maoists might set off a pipe bomb in a school that belonged to the government, but they would leave the library alone because it belonged to the village," says Neubauer. "When everybody else was leaving, we stayed, and we flourished. And we continue to flourish."

In 2006, READ Nepal received the \$1 million Access to Learning Award from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and in 2007, READ Global received a \$3 million grant from the foundation that enabled it to expand its library-building program into India and Bhutan.