

EDITOR'S PICK

# The road to Dharamsala: Former teacher from Hudson Falls devotes life to Tibetan refugees

Kathleen Phalen-Tomaselli Nov 12, 2016 0



Hudson Falls retired teacher Nancy Corliss greets Archbishop Desmond Tutu and His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the Upper Tibetan Children's Village School Junior Library, where she works for more than six months each year. Courtesy photo



Kathleen Phalen-Tomaselli

**O**n Thursday morning, temperatures barely hit 40 degrees in Dharamsala, India. But there are no heating systems in this northern Indian village tucked into the Himalayan Mountains, no thermostat to bump up to take the morning chill off. There never has been. And so it's cold in the small guest house that Nancy Corliss, a retired teacher from Hudson Falls, has called home for the past 10 years.

It's 5:30 a.m. in Dharamsala when she calls Glens Falls just after waking. It is still Wednesday in the Adirondacks. To make the call, Corliss borrows 500 rupees from her driver to put time on her Indian phone. And as she waits in her simple room for the hot water and milk to dissolve the granules of instant coffee, she talks about a life she found quite by accident.

"I spend five months here, two in the spring and three in the fall. I didn't come here to do this, but a little boy grabbed my heart," Corliss said, sharing details about her own childhood. "I came from a background of real badness. I used that and it became the fodder for joy."

During her call to America, Corliss talks about how most of her life she was afraid of everything. She talks about how she used to stay in her Hudson Falls home not doing things to be safe and how braving a vacation trip to India 18 years ago changed her. About how just the other day she traveled for three days across the Himalayas with a co-worker, to a remote school at the Tibetan border, a trip she has made before to bring shoes to displaced children living at the school. She talks about how the Dalai Lama lives down the hill from her and how she works at the Tibetan Children's Village His Holiness started more than half a century ago to help starving orphaned refugees.

After the Chinese People's Liberation Army invaded and occupied Tibet, thousands of Tibetans followed the Dalai Lama in a mass exodus in 1959. Families with small children walked across the Himalayas from Tibet to Nepal so they could remain free Tibetans and preserve their culture. The following year, orphaned sick and malnourished children arrived in Dharamsala from the road construction camps in Jammu. And the Dalai Lama's sister cared for the children before creating the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children. The nursery later became the Tibetan Children's Village, which now has several Indian locations to educate and house thousands of Tibetan children still in exile from Tibet.

Along with others in this region, Corliss has devoted her time and resources to helping the children maintain their Tibetan culture despite their refugee status. And she said many in this region donate to her efforts.

In Plattsburgh, Yangchen and Tenzin Dorjee, who own the Himalaya Restaurant, were refugees living in India when they decided to come to the United States to give their children a better life. "We were not planning to come to the U.S., then after our daughter was born, we said, 'Let's give a future to our daughter,'" Tenzin Dorjee said in the Emmy-award winning Mountain Lake PBS documentary, "Arts in Exile: Tibetan Treasures in Small Town America."



Yangchen Dorjee, one of three children who survived the harsh realities of exile, said her mother had 11 children, but without access to health care, only she and two brothers lived.

"On March 10, 1959, my parents walked from Tibet to Nepal to follow the Dalai Lama," she said in the film. "Their sole reason for following was the desire for freedom for their children."

The Mountain Lake PBS documentary, that will air in this region on Christmas Day on the World channel, chronicles the Tibetan Arts Festival at SUNY Plattsburgh and the 3,480 handmade tiles that became a community mural, created by more than 300 people. The mural, a Tibetan mandala, and the festival are designed to bring awareness to the plight of the Tibetans.

According to artist Sue Burdick Young, who designed the mural, it encompasses designs that have significance to the Tibetan culture and Plattsburgh; it begins with the Tibetan Golden Wheel of Knowledge.



"Arts in Exile" won an Emmy award for Outstanding Documentary in the Boston and New England region. Today, producer Paul Larson and editor Michael Hansen will present the film to an audience at the Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art on Staten Island.

"I am so happy I was assigned this documentary to produce. While making it, I learned about an entirely new philosophy of life, one centered on compassion for all human beings and a healthy approach of solving problems through non-violent methods," Larson said. "We all could benefit from these messages, and that's why I was honored to make a film that celebrates them."

The Dharamsala Tibetan Children's Village is about four kilometers from Corliss' room, and each morning the 70-year-old walks partway up the mountain before her driver finds her and takes her the rest of the way up to the mountain school. She can speak basic Tibetan, but it is a hard language, she said. The children, some she has known for 10 years, call her Nancy La.

"They are shy; sometimes they let me hug them," she said. "But the ones I have known come running across the basketball court and throw themselves at me. They are very happy."

In her 10 years of giving to the exiled children of Tibet, Corliss has donated thousands of pairs of shoes and hundreds of mattresses to the children; she has sponsored many with love and money; she has worked to computerize the Tibetan Children's Village library; and she reads to the children every day she is there. She has created Little Free Libraries throughout northern India that look just like the ones she has created in Hudson Falls. The libraries are stocked with books in Tibetan, Hindi and English, she said.

"I love it. I work seven days a week," she said. "What drives me are the children."

Last Christmas Eve, Corliss walked up to the Tibetan Children's Village like she does every morning she is in Dharamsala. The weather was below freezing. Along with two students and a co-worker, they packed a pocketed bag full of 144 books and carried it to a primary school in the valley. "The teacher was delighted and we spread the books out on the floor so the children could look at them," she said. "Then we put them in the pockets of the bag and everyone got to choose a book to take home that night."

Her early November three-day trek across the Himalayas was to take 40 pairs of shoes to exiled children at Sumdo, a remote school near the Tibetan border.

"There are the Green Mountains, the Adirondacks, the White Mountains, but you can't imagine the Himalayas — they are the highest the mountains in the world and we drove on these mountain roads that are narrow and have huge drop-offs; it is terrifying," Corliss said, adding that she is in villages that are 14,000 feet up. Hudson Falls is 295 feet above sea level; Glens Falls is 344. "We went to a school that was so remote, there is no plumbing, no water and there are outhouses. A man goes down each day to the river and brings back water for 54 children."

Because the needs are huge, Corliss started a nonprofit, To the Himalayas with Love, several years ago. And according to the Tibetan Children's Village budget report, from 2015 to 2016, the nonprofit donated more than 660,000 rupees which is about \$9,000 to the children.

"There are thousands and thousands of children who walked over the Himalayan Mountains to grow up as Tibetans, not Chinese," she said. "This work gives me joy. We have a responsibility to care for one another. This is the best life I have ever had. I will stay here till I drop."

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Tibetan nomadic boys wear their new red boots this week at Sumdo, a remote school in India near the Tibetan border. Hudson Falls resident Nancy Corliss, who lives in India several months a year and works at a Tibetan refugee school, traveled to Sumdo this week with shoes for all of the children. Courtesy photo