

■ lumen achievers

# BRIGHT FUTURE for Nepali village

A 2001 holiday in Nepal has turned into a passion for helping its people for Anthropology graduate Christie Lam.



lumen page 22

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Starting with just US\$400, she has overseen the development of a volunteer-run program known as 'Future Village', which provides education, health and agricultural assistance to the 700 residents of Katunge Village, 100km north of the capital Kathmandu.

"I did some trekking in Nepal in 2001 before I came to Adelaide to study, and fell in love with the country and its people," said Christie, who is originally from Hong Kong.

"I met a lot of tourists and also locals, and I started to think whether the introduction of tourism and also stricter conservation policies had helped improve the locals' livelihood.

"The answer I got from locals was 'no'. I became very curious and used my studies at Adelaide University to see what impact these conservation policies were having in Nepal.

"I based my thesis on 15 months of fieldwork I did among a group of displaced residents known as Rana Tharu who had long lived in the Royal Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve and had been forced by authorities to leave their homeland due to changes in conservation policies.

"What I showed in my thesis was how this displacement and other social changes have gradually and unexpectedly diminished the Rana Tharu's economic livelihoods."

Somewhere in the middle of her time in Nepal, Christie decided that she wanted to do more than just study: she wanted to give back.

It was a life-changing decision which she describes as centering around 'translating knowledge into action'.

"I knew very well the completion of my PhD would give me a qualification, but how would it help the Nepali people?" she said.

"I started Future Village with just US\$400, enough to buy a small piece of land in another part of Nepal that I had visited in my holidays in 2001. With support from my friends, we collected enough in donations to build a two-storey house, which we used to attract more volunteers.

"In the beginning, everything was difficult — just getting donated materials like books and furniture into the village was challenging in itself.

"But the response we had from volunteers far exceeded my expectations, and now the program has made a big difference in the life of the village.



"We've helped teach village children English and provided basic health services while listening to what the locals want — we've always considered it a partnership, rather than a one-way street of us telling them what to do.

"As a result the livelihood of these village people has significantly improved. All the kids are able to go to school, which we've helped upgrade from a primary school to a junior high school, and more than half the population can access drinking water."

After graduating with her PhD in August 2009, Christie is back in Adelaide and teaching at her *alma mater* while hoping to pursue a career in teaching, research or working in non-government organisations (NGOs).

There is still much to be done with Future Village, but Christie said she hopes the project has been developed in such a way that the villagers themselves shape its subsequent direction.

"I think the future of Future Village is in the hands of the villagers," she said.

"Because we encouraged them to express their views in the early stages of the project and did our best to incorporate what they said would be best for them, they now have an important role in managing it today and also where it goes from here.

"For me, the biggest thing I've learned is how important it is to have a dream, and to take action to make the dream come true.

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[www.future-village-nepal.org/en/index.html](http://www.future-village-nepal.org/en/index.html)

Left: Christie Lam pictured at Katunge Village, in the foreground of the two-storey house built from her fund-raising efforts. Above: Christie pictured with Nepali students in their classroom.

STORY BEN OSBORNE