

CLOCKWISE from left: Intricate carvings in Kathmandu's Durbar Square; the children of Sunrise; Emma Taylor with some of the 80 orphans (in traditional dress) in her care; happy faces in the Sunrise playground; the poor streets of Thamel in Kathmandu; a Hindu temple; Golden Buddha; spiritual monument, Boudhanath Stupa; a street seller; the Himalayan range, part of the Everest region.



HAND OF HOPE

Emma Taylor left a high-flying career and sold her worldly possessions to save orphans in Nepal

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In a dirty river bank outside of Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, is an orphanage in a small, run-down brick building. It has no doors and windows, exposed electrical wires hang from the ceiling and there's no regular water supply. It's 2004 and Adelaide girl Emma Taylor has just arrived for a three-month stint as a volunteer. She speaks little Nepali and the people speak no English, which is a problem, because they weren't expecting her. It's at this point Taylor starts to wonder if coming here has been a good decision. Then, several shabbily dressed children poke their heads around the corner and as she sees their beaming smiles, she knows this is where she's supposed to be.

Fast forward to 2008. Taylor is surrounded by almost 80 children at the Sunrise Orphanage, which she set up on the outskirts of Kathmandu Valley in 2005, after saying goodbye to an international advertising and media career. The facilities are still basic, but unlike the other orphanage, the children are well cared for and the place is filled with laughter and love.

"I love everything about the children and the orphanage," Taylor, 36, says. "They are so full of love and have such vibrant spirit. It never ceases to amaze me, despite receiving little, if any, love in their past, they so freely give it."

Most days, Taylor is on hand to welcome the children home from school – a 15-minute walk away – and to help with their homework and share the evening meal. "Depending on the heat, mosquitoes and power supply (it's cut for

40 hours each week), the children sing, tell stories, poems or jokes after dinner. Then we all wish each other sweet dreams, share lots of warm hugs and kisses and head off to bed."

It's a long way from home for this former Adelaide girl, whose dedication to these needy Nepalese children earned her the *Marie Claire*/Garnier Take Care/Taking Care Of The World Around You competition in July.

"We weren't surprised when Emma gave up everything to set up the orphanage," says her sister Georgii Speakman.

"Emma always knew in her heart that there was more to life than what the corporate world had to offer. She's one of the great ones as she makes it happen rather than just daydreaming about the possibility."

Taylor had a relatively uneventful childhood with her parents, Pam and Phil Speakman, sisters Mandy, 38, and Georgii, 26, and brother Tom, 24. She attended Mitcham Primary School and Annesley College and spent time as an exchange student in Denmark before doing a Bachelor of Business (Marketing) at UniSA.

After uni, she started working in advertising and media, at Young and Rubicam in Adelaide, and Ogilvy and Mather in Tokyo. However, it was during a two-month contract as associate media director with Leo Burnett advertising in Vietnam when Taylor realised her true passion – helping children in need.

"I have always loved children and, in high school, when I saw a documentary on squalid orphanages in Romania, I knew I wanted to work with children in a Third World country at





The children, with Taylor, learn thannga painting as part of their education.

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some point,” Taylor says. “Then, in Vietnam, I found myself hanging out with poor, disabled, homeless children on the streets. I had reached 30 and was not inspired to go any further with my career and just felt in my heart it was time to move on to the next chapter of my life.”

And move on she did, starting with her 2004 visit to that first orphanage, where all wasn't as it should have been. “As well as poor facilities, the children were deliberately kept in poor conditions to gain pity, and therefore money, from visitors. Most [of that money] was used to line the pockets of those running it.”

With many children suffering severe neglect, malnutrition and, in many cases, physical and mental abuse, Taylor says it was incredibly difficult to leave when her three months were up. Yet the experience only strengthened her resolve to return and open her own orphanage, with the idea of transferring the children to it, as well as taking in other orphans.

“Despite everything they had been through, from being abandoned by their families, then living through the daily struggle they faced at this orphanage, I could see the light still shining inside each one of them. They just needed someone to love them and give them a chance at life,” Taylor says.

Within six months, she was back, setting up the Sunrise Orphanage with Nepalese friend Sangita Bhandari. Her original plan had been to work in China for 18 months to save enough money to return long-term, but found she couldn't stand being away from the children for that long. Sunrise Orphanage opened in July, 2005, with nine children. At the same time, Taylor set up Sunrise Children's Association Inc (SCAI) in Australia to support the orphanage and its programs. Yet after only five months in Nepal, visa restrictions sent Taylor home.

“I did my last stint in media to save enough to stop going back and forth. I sold my house in Adelaide and my car, and decided to go with what I had and live a very basic lifestyle in

Nepal. That was March 2007 and I have been here ever since.”

When Taylor says basic, she means it. Her first flat was a small room with a single bed and side table, and a shared bathroom with a cold shower and squat toilet. It cost her \$5 a week, but she had to upgrade to an upstairs flat for \$9 as the locals were always at her window, curious to see what belongings a ‘foreigner’ had in their room.

“Living like a lower class Nepali person gave me great insight into the struggles that many people face and a greater understanding of the culture, the people, the family bonds, the sense of brotherhood and what is important to people here. The sense of community spirit, sharing and not clinging to material possessions resonated with me deeply,” she says.

Nepal is known for its peace-loving people and ruggedly beautiful landscape, but also for its corrupt bureaucracy, conflict and extensive poverty. Infant mortality rates are higher than 10 per cent and there's little welfare support for the disadvantaged. This places the children in Taylor's care among the lucky few.

Even for those with families, children in rural areas are expected to work from a very young age. Of those who go to school, they may have to walk up to four hours a day to get there and back. The less fortunate are sold into the sex trade, trafficked to India or forced into armed conflict. Those who live on the streets spend their days searching through rubbish heaps for food or plastic they can sell.

“Life is very tough for children here. They combine school, homework, travel and chores and, with increased migration to Kathmandu and a lack of employment opportunities putting pressure on parents, the number of street children is increasing – Kathmandu now has about 2500 permanent street kids.”

Through SCAI and the orphanage, Taylor and her team are doing their best to change that. SCAI lists its mission as helping to alleviate

GET INVOLVED

Volunteer Sunrise takes volunteers from three weeks to 12 weeks to help with everything from playing with the children, passing on skills, to gardening, maintenance, cooking, cleaning. **Help the Sunrise Children's Village** Volunteers with knowledge in planning, design, landscaping, building and environmental support are needed to help. **Sponsor a Sunrise child** \$39 per month covers a child's food, health care, clothing and education or shelter, carers, household and recreation. SCAI receives no government support, so 100 per cent of your sponsorship goes directly to the children. (SCAI's general expenses are covered by fundraising activities.) **Donate** It's all welcomed, whether once-off or monthly. Visit the Sunrise Children's Association Inc at www.scai.org.au or email enquiry@scai.org.au.

poverty among the underprivileged in Nepal and the communities in which they live.

They aim to do this by working in partnership with local communities to provide education, training, development and income-generating opportunities and work towards long-term sustainable solutions aimed at improving living standards and reducing dependence on other assistance. Disadvantaged teens, girls at risk of exploitation, disabled children, families from slum areas and street youth/school drop-outs are just some of the marginalised groups they want to help with SCAI programs. An example is Sunrise's Outreach Team Social Work program, which takes groups of teens out to learn about social work and the broader community.

Another is the scholarship program, which enables 70 children from the main slum area in Kathmandu to attend school. Sunrise staff and children provide counselling, guidance and income-generating ideas to participants and their families. There is also basic life-skills training, such as housekeeping, nutrition, health and first aid, as well as educational training in computing, sewing, jewellery, incense and candle making, goat breeding, singing, dancing and thannga painting.

“Thannga painting has been a particular success and is something the children can fall back on to earn an income for themselves. We've already sold some paintings in Australia and 75 per cent of the proceeds go into bank accounts for those children,” Taylor says.

Keeping all this going takes a lot of work – when not hands-on with the children or organising Sunrise programs, Taylor spends her time raising awareness, liaising with sponsors and stakeholders and fundraising to keep SCAI and the orphanage going. She is helped out by a management team of local businesspeople and live-in carers, who fulfil the roles of aunty, uncle, cook, cleaner and friend. Taylor herself is known as ‘Aamaa’ meaning ‘mother’, while the locals call her ‘Maya’, meaning ‘love’.

In Adelaide, Taylor's sister Georgii Speakman also helps SCAI and the orphanage with marketing, public relations and fundraising. She's hoping to make a documentary on Nepal with filmmaker Mark Dohring in the future.

While Taylor says working in Nepal has its challenges, she stays focused on what she has achieved and the lives she has helped transform: “I try and live each day to the fullest. It's important to appreciate every moment and every milestone, no matter how small it is.”

Clearly she has many milestones to appreciate and by the sounds of it many more to come. She plans to buy more land to build the Sunrise Children's Village, a permanent and fully self-sustainable home for up to 100 children on the outskirts of Kathmandu Valley. “Love is the foundation on which we have built Sunrise and it will continue to be the core that holds us together so strongly,” she says. “The greatest way to teach the children about love and happiness is to demonstrate it through our love for them and through the way we live our lives.”