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News

## Humanitarian from St. Charles battles poverty, sex trafficking in Nepal



Villagers who use the school created by Katie Hilborn in JanaJyoti, Nepal, decorated her face with a traditional red-paint blessing known as a tikka. It is a symbol of gratitude and happiness. The paint is a mixture of yogurt and rice grains. *courtesy of Global Orphan Prevention*



James Fuller

Posted October 18, 2015 7:30 am



**Ep1: Nepal Earthquake Response (Leychang Birthing Center Mission)**

Global Orphan Prevention

03:31



**Ep 2: Nepal Earthquake Response (Leychang Birthing Center Mission)**

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04:31



**Ep 3: Nepal Earthquake Response (Dhola Resettlement Camp)**

Global Orphan Prevention

07:08

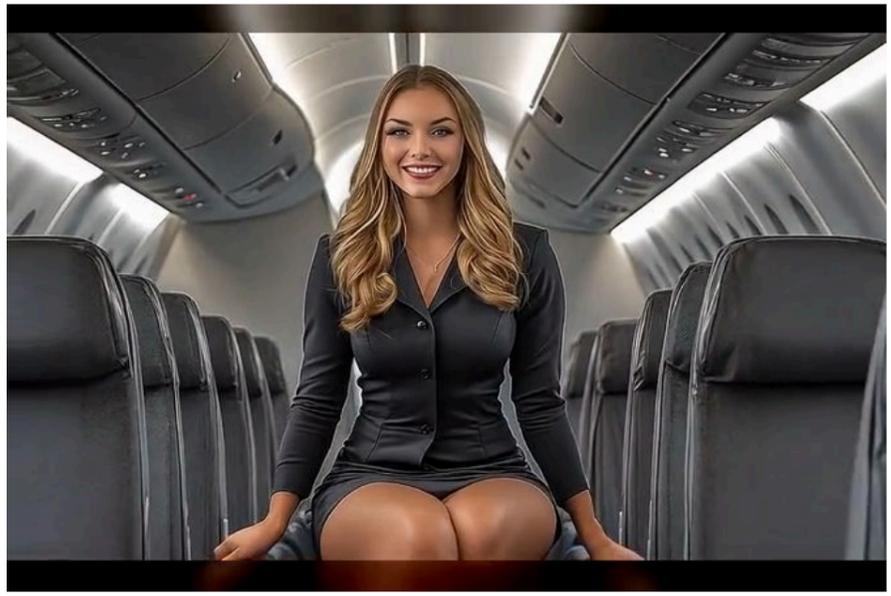
As fever gripped Katie Hilborn, she struggled with consciousness. She'd lost 10 pounds from the E. coli infection. Her ribs jutted from her torso. And now her skin was becoming a translucent white.

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This was supposed to be a relatively easy mission to the southeast corner of Nepal. She would buy a cow for the poor village, which would help it grow a self-sustaining economy.

And now, the villagers were carrying her across a field where 200 hundred people were waiting for her. They could see she was sick, but they believed in her ability to make their children's lives better.

They held her up. They surrounded her with flowers. They painted her face red, part of a ritual signifying gratitude and happiness.

Physically, it was the worst she ever felt. But the ceremony awakened a new calling for the former St. Charles resident.

"It was one of the most special moments in my life," Hilborn recalls. "I just became committed.

"And I always keep my promises. If I say I'm going to do something, I do it."

A mission that began four years ago with just a desire to help orphans would lead to a more daunting effort: The 32-year-old Hilborn is now fighting members of the highest social caste in Nepal to stop child sex trafficking.

## The road to Nepal

Hilborn's natural wanderlust fit well with a desire to help others when she became a member of the youth group led by Cathy Koch at St. Charles Episcopal Church.

"She was amazing even when she was a freshman in high school," Koch said. "She had this adventurous spirit. You knew someday she would just be off and running."

Koch saw those qualities manifest in Hilborn while planning for a mission trip. Every few years the youth group would head to Kentucky or South Dakota to build houses for the underprivileged. But a teenage Hilborn had bigger dreams.

"Katie stood up in front of the group and said, 'You'll always be able to go to South Dakota. How many of you can promise yourselves you'll get out of the country and go to Ireland?'" Koch said.

It was the church's most expensive youth group endeavor. But a series of carwashes, auctions and spaghetti dinners - fueled by Hilborn's enthusiasm - resulted in a pilgrimage to the Emerald Isle and the place believed to be where St. Patrick drove all the snakes away.

"Katie was like a gazelle on that trip," Koch said. "I remember looking at her and just watching her leap up the mountains."

After college in 2006, Hilborn was seeking a purpose. She'd always dreamed of traveling to Africa, where she saw stark contrasts between St. Charles and the everyday lives of the people in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

"I had no idea how bad it was or how poor people could be," she says. "It was a huge shock. Their yearly salaries were like \$300 a year. It just put everything in perspective."

That perspective told her she could make a big impact with essentially just the cash she could raise from contributions from family and friends.

Hilborn has embarked on one humanitarian mission every summer since then. At first it was volunteering at a preschool for orphans in Uganda. Then a wildlife refuge in Bolivia. But it was always the plight of orphans that was more appealing.

"I'm adopted," she explains, "and I think it is something totally subconscious about it that's made we want to help orphans my whole life."

She began volunteering at Nepal's orphan homes, but soon came to learn a terrible secret. Of the 800 or so orphanages in Nepal, about 85 percent of the orphans have at least one living parent, **according to UNICEF**.

The agency says orphanages persuade parents to send their children to the homes with promises of a better education. Then the homes take advantage of the roughly 600,000 foreign tourists looking to donate money and volunteer hours to the orphanages. Some nonprofits are fighting to end the orphan tourism, but there is no government effort against it. If Hilborn wanted to help orphans, she realized, she needed to keep them from becoming orphans.

She formed a nonprofit called **Global Orphan Prevention** and decided its mission should be providing income generation for single moms. At a cost of about \$500 each, she could buy a cow or goat for a young woman with a child. And that animal would provide enough money to allow the woman to put her children in school and support her family.

Hilborn spent the summer of 2011 buying livestock for families - until she stumbled into a broader calling.

## The school

It was on one of her cow-buying trips that she found herself committed to building an entire school. Hilborn was not ready for that kind of commitment. It would cost about \$15,000. But she was willing to hear the villagers out. After bonding over a traditional rice, curry and pickle dish, she contracted the E. coli that left her bedridden.

But the villagers wanted to honor - and encourage - her. In a native ritual, they bestowed her with symbols of religious blessings and traditional forms of gratitude, and peppered her with emotional speeches that fired up her resolve, despite her fever.

"I tried my hardest to convince them to take the cow," Hilborn said. "And they looked at me, and they were like, 'We have tons of cows. We want a school.' They knew the only way for them to rise out of poverty is by educating their younger generation."

Upon returning home to Colorado, Hilborn spent a year fundraising. She hosted art shows and a music concert, which put her efforts over the top. She returned to Nepal in the summer of 2012 and built a six-room school with the help of volunteers and local workers. Then she went a step further the following summer and created a dairy farm to fund the staffing and operations of the school.

When everything started running smoothly, Nepal was hit by its worst earthquake in 80 years.

Lower than livestock

In April, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake rocked Nepal, killing more than 8,000 people. The quake destroyed at least 70,000 buildings and displaced about 3 million Nepalis. Hilborn's school was untouched. Still, it was time again to expand her efforts.

She started by dispatching a medical adviser into the earthquake-affected areas. In tandem, they developed a program to facilitate home births without infection while medical centers could be rebuilt. Hilborn and her **team**, which fluctuates between three and 20 advisers and volunteers, helped teach villagers how to deliver babies. After four months, many of the immediate health crises were being addressed by larger humanitarian groups.

While looking for longer-term solutions to help the villages come back to life, Hilborn discovered perhaps the biggest threat in all of Nepal to keeping mothers and their children together - child sex trafficking.

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Traveling in areas devastated by the earthquake and again helping pregnant mothers, she heard rumors that children in a hilltop village were being trafficked to India. At the bottom of the hill lived the Brahmin, the highest caste members of Nepal. At the top of the hill lived a group of Tamang, one of Nepal's largest indigenous groups. To the Brahmin, Hilborn explained, Tamang are considered lower life-forms than livestock.

"These are extremely marginalized people," she said. "A lot of them don't complete past fifth grade because they can't afford to send their children to school."

After befriending some of the Tamang, Hilborn heard stories that indicated the rumors were true.

"I sat there, and I watched grown fathers crying because their little girls had been taken to India for prostitution," Hilborn said. "The Brahmins were taking them because they don't view them as people. They are animals to them. It was

so heartbreaking."

Hilborn said the Brahmins dispatch local "sleeper" agents who befriend young girls and married couples. They then foster a sense of dissatisfaction with their lives and lure them into following them to India with promises of jobs, love and better lives.

In the first two months after the earthquake, the Central Child Welfare Board in Nepal reported more than 200 young girls as missing.

Most were likely taken by traffickers. That's only a sliver, though, of the more than 12,000 women and girls trafficked out of Nepal each year, according to the **United Nations**.

Hilborn's mission, then, became "to do everything in my power to make sure not another daughter is taken."

Literacy, she says, is the answer.

Hilborn plans to follow the same model she's found success with before. If she can provide the schools with income-generating farms, then those children can receive a free education. A partnering nongovernmental organization is already in the process of rebuilding the seven schools in the villages where trafficking has become a hotbed. It will take about six months. That's how long Hilborn has to raise \$105,000 to start a farm for each school.

"It's the largest amount I've ever tried to raise," she said. "But you know, I don't see why I can't."

She's hoping to attract a corporate sponsor, but she says good, old-fashioned local fundraisers also can help her meet her goal.

Even if her effort falls short, Hilborn remains committed to humanitarian work.

"The joy in people's eyes when you've changed their lives, it's just a rush," she said. "Helping people can become an addiction. It feels so good. You just always feel like, 'OK, I want to help someone else now.' Everything I do is 100 percent voluntary because it's the gratitude I feel from the people that keeps me going."

**These tales might bolster your faith in humanity**

### How to help

Visit <http://globalorphanprevention.org/> to donate to the cause and subscribe to Hilborn's notes from the field. To host a local fundraiser, contact Hilborn at [Katie@globalorphanprevention.org](mailto:Katie@globalorphanprevention.org).

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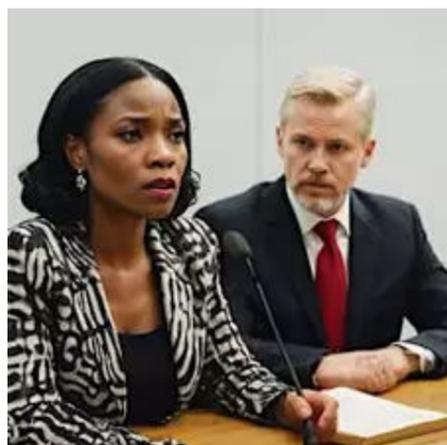
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