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Karma Bhotia, left, and his wife, Jyamu, talk at the Himalayan Kitchen recently. Both natives of the same village in Nepal, the two immigrated to the United States in 2000. Karma has returned to Nepal a few times over the years and happened to be there when the devastating 7.8 earthquake hit April 25. He escaped mostly unscathed and is now raising funds through his nonprofit foundation for those who were not so lucky./Photo by Jennaye Derge

## Durango's Karma

### Nepali transplant helps pick up pieces in quake's wake

by Jen Reeder

On April 25, Karma Bhotia was having lunch with friends in the eastern region of Nepal after a visit with his mother in India when an earthquake shook the house.

"It was really long – about 12 seconds," Karma said. "The house was moving and shaking and waving."

His friends shouted "Earthquake!" and ran outside, but Karma was focused on the ceiling beam above, trying to stay under it.

"They were suddenly gone," he said. "Time to run out!"

Karma, a Durango resident and native of Nepal, survived Nepal's devastating magnitude-7.8 earthquake that killed more than 8,000 people, injured 19,000 and left hundreds of thousands homeless. After calling Durango to tell his wife, Jyamu – with whom he owns Himalayan Kitchen and Dreams of Tibet – that he was alive and learning family members had survived as well, he contacted a "high ranking" police friend to try to find a way out.

"All transportation was completely blocked – all roads gone and local domestic flights cancelled for three days," he said.

The friend suggested a few risky roads to try, and after a few days, Karma and his driver set off toward Kathmandu. There were many large gaps in the road, and when Karma's driver braked, Karma had to urge him to speed up in order to clear the gaping holes. Once in Nepal's capital, they found even more destruction.

“So badly damaged was Kathmandu – everywhere lying dead bodies. Many buildings – most buildings – collapsed. I had to stay three days in a tent,” he said.

One morning he traveled to a nearby village where, out of 100 homes, 90 were demolished. Locals begged him to photograph their rubble to try to get publicity for aid. It was the same in the town he visited the next day, where he was moved by a single mother – her husband died the previous year – who was utterly “numb” from losing her home.

“I took some money and handed it to her – she didn’t smile, she didn’t say ‘thank you,’ she was just shocked,” he said. “My heart is still, ‘How can I help her?’”

Karma, who was a mountain guide in Nepal for 15 years before becoming a chef in Austria and immigrating to the United States in 2000 with Jyamu, also visited a valley where he led a group of Durangoans on a trek in 2013. He found it “completely washed out,” and an entire family at the Hotel Shangri-La, where the group had had “good conversation,” was killed aside from two children who were out of the region when the earthquake hit.

Karma is deeply concerned for such survivors, particularly orphaned children and the poor, such as farmers whose harvests are now buried beneath landslides. “They need a lot of recovery and a lot of help for this,” he said.



Destruction caused by the April 25 earthquake in Kathmandu. Local resident Karma Bhotia was in Nepal during the quake and spent three days in the city in a tent. Some villages lost up to 90 percent of their buildings./Photo by Karma Bhotia

He said he is grateful that Durango is rising to the challenge. When Karma returned to Durango, local friend Erica Max offered to organize a fundraiser. The goal was to raise money for Karma’s nonprofit, the Karma and Jyamu Bhotia Foundation, which was founded in 2014 to promote education and health in Nepal, but is now also helping fund restoration efforts.

On Wed., May 13 – the day after a magnitude-7.3 “aftershock” injured more than 2,500 and drove the number of homeless to more than half a million –

various Durango businesses and restaurants participated in the benefit, pledging a certain percentage of proceeds to the Foundation. At the Himalayan, where 100 percent of proceeds that day were going to the fund, the lines stretched out the door. Durango raised more than \$15,000 in one day.

“Durango is the best,” Karma said, noting he’s come to that conclusion after living and traveling extensively in Asia, Europe and the United States. “Positive energy, and people are so kind

and helpful and the community is so strong.”

Durangoans will have a second chance to support earthquake victims Wed., May 27, when the Durango Arts Center hosts a screening of “Good Karma,” a documentary about Karma’s trek in Nepal with Durangoans and the work of the Foundation. The fundraiser will also include a silent auction.

Karma and Jyamu said creating their foundation was the realization of a lifelong dream. The two grew up as friends, about “five minutes walking distance” from each other’s homes, in a village in eastern Nepal called Chyamtang. Both of their families were poor, and they were often hungry. When they were about 12 years old, they were sent to a school that was a seven-day hike from their village.

“We had to stay there without parents and without family,” Karma said. “So we had a really hard time, and that taught us to be strong and kind to others.”

Jyamu needed a lot of inner strength to withstand the societal pressures to stay home instead of pursuing an education. “I was the first woman who finished high school in that whole region – about nine counties,” she said. “And I became the first woman teacher, too.”

Now they hope to give back and inspire people in Nepal through their work with their foundation, which is completely volunteer-run. A school in their hometown was destroyed by an earthquake in 2012, so they rebuilt it last year (it survived the latest earthquakes) – and started offering free lunches since they know firsthand how hard it is to concentrate in class on an empty stomach.

“We love to leave something behind us,” Jyamu said. “Education is the most powerful chance to change this world.”

They’ve also learned a lot from Nepal. Jyamu said she loves the tradition of extended families living together, and the emphasis on sharing. Karma agreed, saying Nepal has the most hospitable people in the world.

“We never use, ‘This is mine.’ We always use, ‘This is ours,’” he said.

Now Karma and Jyamu, who have three grown sons, say they will focus on rebuilding specific villages in Nepal to see concrete results, rather than just giving “little bags of rice everywhere.” Foundation board members in Nepal are still reporting on damage from the May 12 earthquake, which impacted the eastern region more than the first quake, to help them decide where the money will be best spent. Two villages, including the one with 90 destroyed homes, have already been chosen.

While depression is becoming rampant in Nepal, Jyamu and Karma are trying to focus on gratitude for the generosity of the Durango community – which Karma calls his “backbone” – and staying positive.

“What Mother Nature commands, you have to follow. So in this moment, we don’t have to be sad or angry, we have to accept,” Karma said. “And one thing is how we can support them and give them some energy and power and some strength. That we can do.”

Donations to the Karma and Jyamu Bhotia Foundation can be made in person at the Himalayan Kitchen, 992 Main Ave., or online at <http://bhotiafoundation.org/>.