

# When worlds collide

When Sir Edmund Hillary arrived in Nepal in 1953 it was to climb a mountain, but he went on to achieve far more than scaling Everest's heights. His tireless work supporting education in Nepal, which has become an admirable legacy, has positively affected the lives of many young people there. **JEN RICHES** met one such woman, Laxmi Gurung, to find out more



**LEFT:** Laxmi Gurung graduating from Lincoln University, Canterbury. **RIGHT:** Mingma Norbu Sherpa.

Despite her tiny stature, Laxmi Gurung stands out in Mustang, the area of Nepal where she lives and works. It's her Western clothes and confident stride, for starters – many of the local women she passes on her walk to work are bent double, often carrying a huge load on their backs secured only by a forehead strap. Despite this, Laxmi is always met with a smile and a gentle 'Namaste'.

Nepal's rural society is deeply conservative which, if you're a woman, means your future will quickly narrow to marriage, child rearing and hard domestic work. Around half of rural women in Nepal have never attended school, and only one in three can read and write. This could easily have been Laxmi's lot, as she grew up in a remote part of Nepal where prospects of education were limited. But someone before her had already laid the foundation for change. In 1960, seven years after his triumphant Everest expedition, Sir Edmund Hillary opened Khumjung School, in the heart of Sagarmatha National Park in the Khumbu region.

Five-year-old Mingma Norbu Sherpa was one young boy in the first class on the first day, and was lucky enough to meet Hillary himself. Mingma became a Hillary protege, later attending high school in Kathmandu and then Lincoln University, Canterbury where he studied national parks and conservation. Mingma dedicated much of his life to conservation based on Hillary's philosophy of local management. In 1989 he joined the World Wildlife Fund, setting up its Nepal and Bhutan offices. In 2006,

Mingma realised his dream when the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area in East Nepal was handed back to be managed by the local community.

Sadly, the moment of celebration turned to great tragedy when the helicopter Mingma was travelling on after the ceremony crashed, killing all on board. That could have been the end of the story, but Mingma had touched so many lives, a scholarship was set up in his memory to allow other students to study at Lincoln University and carry on his good work. Laxmi was one of the students chosen for this scholarship, graduating with a Masters in Tourism Management specialising in sustainable tourism and agriculture in 2013.

Laxmi returned home to take up her new role as a government officer in local peacekeeping. The role is with the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction and is similar to being a community leader. "It's about helping people – if they have emotional problems and conflict comes, then my role will be negotiations, and giving some suggestions for solutions," explains Laxmi. "I will also be a mediator, between the people and the government. Peace doesn't only mean resolving conflict."

It's not just Laxmi's education that sets her apart from other Nepalese women. While they are dressed in a traditional rainbow spectrum of brightly coloured saris or long shift dresses over loose trousers, Laxmi is dressed in a purple Gore-Tex jacket, three quarter-length



**ABOVE: Laxmi and brother Dara on their organic farm.**  
**BELOW: Laxmi at the orchard.**

trousers and sneakers. Laxmi says sometimes people may be intimidated by her education and are scared to talk to her. But she also believes prestige is important to her role. "Everybody knows me, even small kids, and they say 'She is the one who has studied a lot.' That makes me feel proud and like I want to set an example, be a role model for the next generation and encourage them to go for education."

Laxmi's own path had its roots in tragedy: her father died in an accident when she was very young. She was lucky to meet Dr Edward Noel McIntosh and his wife Linda, her "American parents", who financed Laxmi's education at a boarding school in Kathmandu. "From age seven I was independent," says Laxmi. But family remain her foundation. "I consider my two brothers, Dara and Gonpo, and my sister Kathryn the great supporters of my life."

Laxmi tells me her father was the head of the village, and the first in her village to see the opportunities from tourists visiting their region. He opened a hotel, Yac Donald's, which her brother Dara now runs. It's clear he and Laxmi inherited their father's entrepreneurial talent: before she got her scholarship and studied at Lincoln, Laxmi worked as an organic farmer, successfully expanding the market for their local cash crop of apples.

"I saw lots of apples here, but no market," explains Laxmi. "I'd hurt my leg and could not work, so I bought apples from the local farmer and dried them, because that was something I could do with my injury." When Laxmi went to The Organic Village in Kathmandu to sell the dried apples, the



owner was surprised that an educated woman was 'just' a farmer. "I told him, I don't feel ashamed to sell my product, I'm trying to bring income to my community." Impressed,

he bought the entire batch and they started working together. Eventually Laxmi bought a share in the organic farm. "They gave me the title of director, but I never used it because I'm not an expert."

The experience was great preparation for Laxmi's studies. "I was inspired by how much Nepal could benefit by following New Zealand's successes. Both countries have a great landscape, and like New Zealand we have tourism and agriculture, but we are not as developed."

Talking about New Zealand, Laxmi's eyes brighten. "I had a very good time. The living standard is different, which made me think a lot about my country. The Hillarys and the work they've done - and our Mount Everest - together made a great relationship between New Zealand and Nepal. There's a strong bond."

Laxmi describes New Zealanders as very humble. "They are a lot like the Nepalese: when we make a friend, it's for life." True to this philosophy, Laxmi is keen to give credit to her mentors - Professor David Simmons and Dr Stephen Espiner from Lincoln University, Dr Ghanashyam Gurung from WWF, Lisa Choegy and Dr Shailendra Thakali - who helped her get where she is today.

It was Laxmi's experience of New Zealand values, as much as her academic study, which led her to take up her new peacekeeping role. "I learned lots of things in New Zealand, and I made lots of friends. Here in Nepal we always think, 'I have to study to earn more money,' but in New Zealand it is about values and ethics. You do something that interests you, and also for the social cause, the wellbeing of all human beings."

And it's these progressive attitudes that could be key to

preserving the culture of a traditional Nepalese world, which Laxmi sees slipping away.

"The women here make traditional handicrafts, but they don't understand that they have skills. They have to work hard, and nobody praises them. So they lose interest in their skills. Today, no one is learning traditional skills, so when older people die, the traditions will die with them," says Laxmi.

"If I can encourage their talent, they can earn their own money. So many women lack education, so they're dependent on others. They're not self sufficient, so they're always repressed. I can help them establish their own company if they want my help."

It's an exciting prospect, but Laxmi acknowledges that changing attitudes can be challenging. Asked if she wasn't tempted to stay in New Zealand, she replies: "I am a small-village girl, who went to seek higher education in a different part of the world so I can serve my country, my district and my village. That was my dream.

"Sometimes your life is up and sometimes down. You have to balance both. Everything is a lesson; if you don't have positive energies you can't do anything." 

