

# MOUNTAINS OF HOPE

Belmont teacher embarking on project to build schools in Nepal

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News staff

When Troy Harris climbed a mountain in Nepal hoping to find some inspiration in his life, he was rewarded 10-fold by the experience.

The Belmont phys-ed teacher's life was changed irrevocably when he went trekking in the Himalayas two years ago and spent three weeks hiking with a Nepalese guide who also happened to be a teacher.

Stepping along rocky paths amid breathtaking mountain views, the pair discussed politics, philosophy, religion, and differences between their countries' education systems.

They soon found themselves treading a common path in more ways than one.

"The ideas he had about his country were just incredible and he had these amazing concepts about education compared to the world he's living in," said Harris, 36, referring to the corruption in the small Asian country,

sandwiched between China and India.

Harris said in Nepal, students often walk two to four hours to school through extremely mountainous terrain.

But when they get there, it's hardly worth the effort.

The schools are often little more than mud huts with virtually no supplies, surrounded by dusty fields and if the kids are lucky, a dirt basketball court.

They're also a recruiting ground for Maoists who often come there to indoctrinate and recruit the students to the rag-tag rebel army that wants to overthrow the government and replace it with a revolutionary peasant regime, Harris explained.

The Nepalese government places a low priority on education, with virtually no state funding for it, meaning only parents whose children have money go to school, he continued.

Nepotism and cronyism proliferate in the school system, with the government appointing unqualified people to teaching positions, leaving educated, qualified teachers like Harris' friend — Mahindra Dahal — to scratch out a living doing other, less cerebral jobs — like guiding.

Harris said he was struck by the injustice of the system and vowed to return

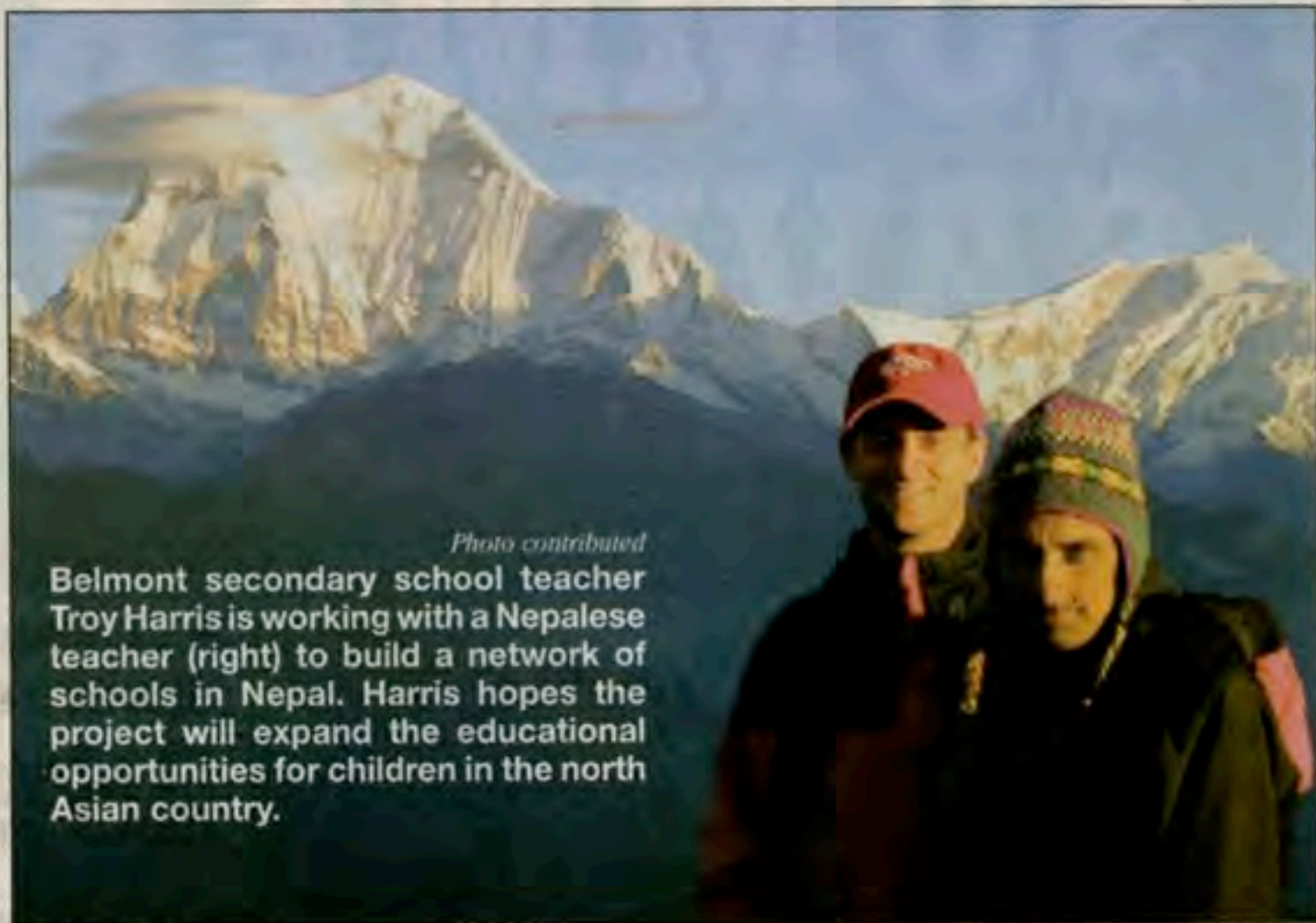


Photo contributed

Belmont secondary school teacher Troy Harris is working with a Nepalese teacher (right) to build a network of schools in Nepal. Harris hopes the project will expand the educational opportunities for children in the north Asian country.

to Canada to do something about it.

"I came back with passion and inspiration...," said Harris. "At first I thought I'd just give (Dahal) some money, and then (the idea) got bigger."

Harris is now committed to building a school in Nepal, and he's formed a non-profit society — the Canadian World Education Society, or CanWes, for short — to do it.

"My goal is to provide an opportunity for youth in Nepal to be educated," said Harris, who has taken a leave of absence from his teaching duties at Belmont to get the project off the

ground.

He hopes to start building the school by the end of the year, and has set himself a goal of \$15,000 - \$20,000 to do it.

So far he's lined up a handful of donations, and he's planning on travelling across Canada over the next few months to raise more money for the project.

Harris said one of his top priorities is to make schooling in Nepal more accessible for girls, who are not encouraged to go beyond a basic education, and often leave school at a young age to either get married or help tend their families' fields.

"I'm providing an opportu-

nity for someone to believe that they can achieve their goals, that they can do anything they want. That would be the ultimate," he said.

Harris said eventually he hopes to build a network of schools throughout Nepal, all financed through the foundation, and maybe even look at ways for the villagers to improve their water quality and hygiene, which is substandard in Nepal.

To find out more about Harris' school-building project, or to donate money, contact him through his family in Langford at 478-7523, or e-mail troydavin-harris@hotmail.com.