

Published: Friday, March 21, 2008

Half a world away, students get rare view of Nepal

- Meadowdale students get a glimpse, friends

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On a TV screen in a classroom at Meadowdale High School Thursday, March 13, Nirmala Gyawali gave a tour of her house in Nepal.

Gyawali, who's blind, used a staff to work her way expertly around the house. The family walks to get water, she explained. In the background her sisters cooked pudding on a fire in the open courtyard, next to goats, in the winter cold.

Next stop: the new toilet. Gyawali bought it with money she saved while a Fulbright Scholar at Colorado State University in Boulder, Colo.

Robert Rose, the class' guest speaker on Thursday, March 13, showed the video and filled in background.

Rose has been working with Julie Carey's sixth-period World History Class at Meadowdale to give the students a window on Nepal.

The students have Nepalese pen pals who attend Durbar School in Kathmandu. Meadowdale students have raised \$800 for the school and have been learning about Nepalese history and culture in class.

Rose is the founder of The Rose International Fund for Children, or TRIFC, a nonprofit that helps disadvantaged children in Nepal.

He recently returned from a two-month trip there, and made a surprise visit to the Meadowdale class Thursday to give the students replies from their pen pals.

Carting a canister of hot Nepalese tea and box of T-shirts from Nepal, Rose showed students videos he took on the trip.

In addition to the video of Gyawali, Rose showed video interviews with the Durbar School pen pals.

On screen, Laxmi Dongal, a Nepalese student, said she loves to sing. After persistent coaxing, she shyly burst into a rendition of a Nepali song.

One of the things that's struck Meadowdale students is that even though their pen pals live in physical poverty, they seem to be in good spirits. Many of the Nepalese students work as servants in other people's homes after school to make money.

"I think that they're happy, even if they don't have money," said Rebekah Anderson, Meadowdale sophomore.

"It's more based around family, more than our culture is."

"Just to realize how they live, to see what they have...but the smile on their face," said sophomore Dru Miller. His pen pal, Dinesh, wants to be an electrical engineer.

Miller wrote Dinesh that he wanted to be a pilot, drawing a picture of himself in an airplane.

"Music is sweet," Miller wrote, drawing a line between "sweet" and the translation "good." "What is your favorite song?"

Rose previously did a pen pal project with an elementary class, but was looking for older students this time in the hope that the correspondence would continue after this year.

The project has helped teacher Carey show her students see the relevance of the outside world. So often, classes are merely academic, and the attitude is: "Who cares?" she said.

"It's hard for a 10th-grader to get interested in the world outside," she said. "Some kids have never been outside Washington state. You can tell them over and over again there's this world out there, but this helps them feel it."

The students are thrilled to get their pen pal's letters, she said.

Even though there's poverty here locally, it's an education for the students to see how much more extreme poverty is in other parts of the world, Rose said. While he was in Nepal in January and February, there were shortages of gas and water, leading to eight-hour lines at the pump, because of political unrest. There were also eight-hour blackouts, despite the cold.

Rose stayed for three days at Gyawali's house, and though it was fun, he was thankful to get somewhere where he could take a hot shower, he said.

The disadvantaged children his organization works with are orphans and disabled children who have been mistreated and ignored, partly thanks to cultural preconceptions.

"Life is hard there," he said.

Still, the students' perception that their Nepalese counterparts seem happy is not off base, he said.

Gyawali had the same observation.

"Nirmala said when going to school (in Colorado) that people here are busy doing different things," Rose said. "Life in the village is simple. She said they are happier with less things."

For more information about TRFIC, see <http://www.trifc.org>.



Enterprise/CHRIS GOODENOW Meadowdale sophomores Rachel Russell (left) and Rachel Becraft compare similar shirts from Nepal.



Enterprise/CHRIS GOODENOW After a trip to Nepal, Robert Rose shows students in Julie Carey's class a video of his trip, including videos of some their pen pals, Thursday, March 13, at Meadowdale High School.



Enterprise/CHRIS GOODENOW In a dark classroom, students in Julie Carey's class watch the projected image of one of their pen pals from Nepal, Thursday, March 13, at Meadowdale High School.