

# NEPAL: A FULBRIGHT LEGACY OF COMMUNITY

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## ABSTRACT

As a Fulbright Specialist to Nepal, my primary responsibility was to develop curriculum and train faculty for a master's degree program in psychology. My Fulbright placement was with the Institute for Crisis Management (ICMS), Samarpan Academy. I actively pursued additional opportunities to build community by partnering with other agencies, including an NGO, Empower Nepali Girls Organization, that I had volunteered for. The relationships built and experiences shared have created a legacy of service, love, and community.

**Keywords:** Nepal • psychology • Fulbright • empower • girls education



## INTRODUCTION

Christmas Eve 2013 and I stand at the edge of a village in Kathmandu, Nepal, wrapping my scarf around Muni. We hug tightly and she whispers, “Don’t forget me”. Her words pierce my heart and hold me captive.

I had volunteered in Nepal with my husband and 12-year-old son, over Christmas break that year. This was intended to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience to work with disenfranchised girls at risk of being sold into early marriage, domestic service, or slavery. The aim of our host organization—Empower Nepali Girls (ENG)—was to provide educational opportunities that helped empower girls to grow and develop in safe environments. My family had provided educational scholarships and was invited to come and see firsthand who and what the funds supported.

As parents, we had questioned the whole idea: the harsh environment of Everest and abject living conditions in the region, missing Christmas with extended family, and whether our son was ready for such an experience. We reasoned that the benefits would outweigh the concerns, packed our Christmas socks along with trekking gear, and departed. Instead of baking cookies and traveling to visit loved ones, we spent Christmas distributing scholarships and conducting school and home visits in a land far, far away!

It was on our last home visit that I met Muni. She had been caring for her sick mother and baby sister in a one-room dwelling. The moment we said goodbye, I knew I would be leaving a piece of my heart there and already knew I would return to check on her progress along with so many other beautiful children I had met during those unforgettable weeks in Nepal. I promised I would not forget.

## YOU SHOULD APPLY FOR A FULBRIGHT

And I kept that promise. Each year my family raises as many scholarships as possible, and we return as members of the ENG Team to check on the girls and assess needs. On one of these visits, I met a colleague for coffee to discuss how to better navigate the NGO system with integrity. By the end of our second or third cup, she said, “Patrice, you should apply for a Fulbright. Your focus in mental health, advocacy, and higher education is so needed here. I’ll send you some contacts in higher education to speak with about possibilities.” I immediately thought, “Me?... and Fulbright?... probably not in a million years!”

Nevertheless, committing to follow through, I returned home to Louisiana where I continued to teach and supervise clinical psychology to my beloved graduate students. But I also managed to be approved for the specialists’ roster and collaborated with the Institute of Crisis Management ICMS, Samarpan Academy to create an application to develop curriculum and faculty pedagogy for one of the early master’s degree programs in psychology for the country of Nepal.

In 2017, while sitting at my desk following a long day of clients, I noticed an email from Fulbright. I thought to myself, just open it and get it over with. Then you can move on. Girls like me that grew up in rural Mississippi don’t become Fulbright Scholars, right? Well, apparently, they do!

“Congratulations!” it began. “On behalf of the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, I am pleased to advise you that you have been selected for a Fulbright award to Nepal.” I couldn’t see the rest for the tears! I knew, without a doubt, my life was about to take a turn.

## SERVICE IN NEPAL

By the spring of 2018. I was living in Thamel, Nepal and working as a Fulbright Specialist writing curriculum for a new master’s degree in psychology, collaborating and teaching with numerous mental health professionals, and conducting a qualitative research project on mental health training in Nepal. These were my primary responsibilities as outlined in my contract, but I understood the assignment to include more. I had the opportunity to build a community, connect resources and truly experience the culture! I made the most of every day. My answers to almost all opportunities and invitations were “yes” or “why not”? My personal time was spent hosting dinners with new friends, attending weddings, participating in religious ceremonies, enjoying festivals, trekking, guest-lecturing, and providing keynote addresses for mental health advocacy. I was even invited, and agreed of course, to publish a book “Helping Others” with EKTA Publishing for training lay workers in rural health post locations. In addition to the work focused on a viable future for the girls of Nepal, I also incorporated the older young women into activities

that were appropriate for them. By the time I left, I was part of an integrated network of colleagues and friends, sharing cultures, ideas, resources, and our daily lives. I continue to volunteer actively in programming and mentoring for ENG.

### RE-ENTRY

The time passed so quickly, all the objectives were met, and it was time to return home. I had missed my husband, who held down the fort at home and all during our son Bryce's senior year of high school! And it was already time for graduation shortly upon my return. They were both so supportive and proud, but it was difficult for them to truly grasp what I had experienced, my need to share it and have them understand how much, and why, I cared so much. As a psychologist, I understood the difficult side of "re-entry", and yet, I had a hard time explaining my emotions.

Nepal was simultaneously beautiful, rewarding, and challenging. I missed the sense of adventure, the challenges, my colleagues, the students, and the work with Empower Nepali Girls Organization. I felt pangs of guilt about clean water, hot showers, my son's immense opportunities, and the excess of our life. That guilt turned into profound gratitude, making me more aware of my privilege than ever before. I needed more Fulbright in my life.

### SEEKING CONNECTIONS TO CONTINUE SERVICE

I went in search as I attended my first Fulbright Association conference in the Fall of 2019 seeking connection with other Fulbrighters. I learned that there were alumni chapters in almost every state, but not in Louisiana. I also learned that Fulbright had a travel program, and so, why not? Off to Thailand I went that Spring with a group of amazing individuals I remain friends with today. I shared with a fellow traveler that "Fulbright has a way of feeding your soul as you serve others."

*Fulbright has a way of feeding your soul as you serve others*

In 2020, we remedied the lack of a Chapter for Louisiana. I rounded up a small group of Fulbrighters from around the State. I agreed to be the President of the Chapter if they would serve as Board members. We began our Charter as Covid-19 closed in on a totally virtual platform. This team has worked collaboratively and with so much fun, respect, and support for each other. Over the past 4 years, we built a program in which our Louisiana Fulbrighters could serve together in their own communities. We were now in a position to support young international Fulbrighters making our Louisiana their temporary home.

I continued during this time to return to Nepal yearly except for Covid-19 lockdown, to guest-lecture for college/university partners and volunteer with ENG. We currently support 300 girls with 43 attending college/university. The Fulbright network has assisted our girls secure placements in higher education

as they have grown up and achieved remarkable academic success. I began to host teams of my clinical psychology graduate students from Louisiana for international service. Our primary partner to serve is ENG. The objectives of this programming often center around mental health, leadership, mentoring, and advocacy for women.

Remember that Fulbright community I left in Nepal in 2018? It is more integrated and present in my life than ever! The time spent with Fulbright provides an abundance of possibilities for successful programming that is mutually beneficial. Partners include the Fulbright Commission, the Embassy, sister NGOs, mental health colleagues, community agencies, numerous colleges/universities, and an army of wise and willing colleagues and friends.

This spring, the Fulbright Association chose Nepal for an Insight Travel Program destination, and I had the distinct honor of serving as a host for two groups: A trekking group into Everest (where Muni is now one of the first female guides on the mountain following college), and a cultural tour group of the Kathmandu valley. The identified service partner was ENG, and our college/university group of ENG girls volunteered to serve as guides to the Fulbrighters! Fulbright and ENG collaborated on resources to provide and distribute over 300 uniforms to children in four schools with severe poverty. The Fulbright teams showed up with huge hearts, ready to serve, and went above and beyond! Fulbrighters are very special people, and I am humbled to be a part of this distinguished group.

### **FULL CIRCLE**

It is the evening of April 12, 2024, and I am celebrating Nepali New Year's Eve. I am standing on the balcony of a hotel in Kathmandu at dusk looking out over the city to the stunning Himalayan mountains in the distance. I am taking a quiet moment to acknowledge how much I love this place and the people that reside here. I think back over all the lives that have been touched and transformed, my life especially. I think of how much I have learned, the life-time relationships built, and the community I am a part of. A significant part of my life's work has taken place here, halfway around the world. I turn back to join the party in a room filled with Fulbright Alumni visiting on the Insight Travel Program, ENG leadership team members (once scholarship recipients), Fulbright Commission leaders, Embassy friends, community partners, colleagues, brand new Fulbrighters about to leave for the US and those from the US just beginning their assignments in Nepal. I think to myself, "they have no idea of the impact Fulbright is about to have on their lives."

I glance across the room and a handsome young man smiles broadly, raises his glass, and mouths the words "Happy New Year, Mom." My heart is beyond full! Bryce has completed his master's degree and is a newly assigned ETA to Nepal for the coming year. I'm guessing we made an okay decision all those years ago to whisk him away with us on our adventure to a far away, unfamiliar place.

All these precious people! They are indeed my home away from home, my extended family, in this one room celebrating a new year, a new beginning. All part of an unimaginable legacy of service, love, relationships, and community. I'm looking forward to the future and can't wait to see what is just over the horizon. I am forever grateful for this Fulbright experience that has added such value to my life.

Here's to the Next Chapter!



Nepali New Year's Eve Party 2024 in Kathmandu  
Nepal

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**BIOGRAPHY**

Dr Patrice Moulton is beginning her term as a member of the National Board of Directors for the Fulbright Association and she is a professor of Clinical Psychology at Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana. Patrice hosts charity teams to Nepal each year to volunteer with ENG and raise scholarships. Her graduate students participate as team members for international service-learning experience. She and her husband love to travel and trek and are looking forward to spending another Christmas in Nepal as they visit Bryce during his ETA service. She can be contacted at [moultonp@nsula.edu](mailto:moultonp@nsula.edu)

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