

From the Volunteer Desk

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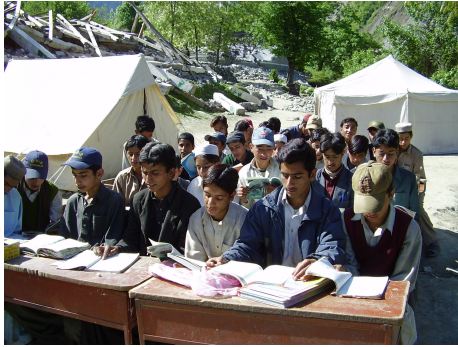
It was around lunch time on the 8th of October and I was sitting with some of my university friends in Edinburgh when the news of the earthquake was first broken to me. From that moment on I was glued to any form of news that I could get about the earthquake. Soon after that I was certain that I needed to do whatever I could. The areas mainly affected by the earthquake were ones that I had visited as part of my annual family holidays in the previous years leading up to the earthquake.

Before leaving Edinburgh I could not do much personally as I had never thought in this field and university work took most of my time. What did emerge however was a friend of mine, Sam, ready to come to Pakistan primarily as a tourist but also willing to help out a little in terms of volunteering while he was here.



On arrival in Pakistan I was lucky enough to get in touch with Dr and learn about KLWT. His enthusiasm and energy towards the project was a breath of fresh air. I learnt that KLWT was small with not too many resources yet was aspiring to do all it could. I liked this and so did my friend and we jumped on board immediately. We learnt about how before the earthquake the trust was involved Dr Ayaz Khan local area, memorably in the building and running of a free eye clinic in an area known as Chakwal.

After the earthquake we learnt about how they were involved in the initial aid period and then after visiting Bhunja valley to deliver aid they bought into the idea of rebuilding the schools and the Basic Health Unit (BHU). We found out how the first time they went they found the Head master of the High School, Mr. Ali Haider Shaheen, teaching simultaneous classes under the shade of the trees alone with nothing but the little he could salvage from the wreckage.



We found out how there was a Boys Primary School, Girls Primary School, High School and a BHU there as well as a brand new Girls Middle School that had as of yet not become operational. All of this was rubble now. We saw a lot of photos and learnt how the majority of the deaths occurred in the school going generation. They happened in these places as well as the private school located not far from these buildings. We were told that all but the Girls Middle School and the private school were planned to be rebuilt.



We then also got the opportunity, or shall I say were invited to go for a weekend short visit to the Sehri Bagh, the village the schools are in, to go and see for our selves what had been done, what the conditions were like at the moment and what was planned for the future. Apart from that we were sent with a little task of making the drawing of the entire boundary of the land for the new buildings.



On Saturday 10th June 2006 at 0800 my dad, Sam, Mr. Kamran (another volunteer) and I left for Balakot where we were to leave our car and take a jeep the rest of the way. Most of the journey up to reaching Balakot is a blur but I still remember that not long outside of Balakot we could start to see all the land slides that had occurred during and after the

main earthquake. I had traveled the same road only a couple of years earlier and had remembered the slopes a lot greener and fuller of trees. Balakot itself lay in ruins or at least the part of Balakot that we got to see. We bypassed Balakot itself but this was where the full extent of the power of Allah began to be shown to me for the first time. I had seen all these areas, or areas like it on the news a fair bit but seeing it in person was a lot different and a lot more hair raising. There were land slides everywhere and where once ran an amazing road any car could go on, now you needed a jeep. The work of clearing the landslides from the roads was well on its way but in places the road had been ripped and cracks could be seen everywhere. Where there was no landslide the road would be as it was and then suddenly there would be a sharp rise of well over a meter and then the road would continue.



We made it to the village and there Mr. Zahid and Mr. Rauf along with others welcomed us and then we took a tour of the area. The classes had been upgraded from under the trees to being in marquees imported from the UK especially for the purpose, by KLWT. There had never been electricity in the valley, no telephone other than the satellite phone used by the trust and the toilet facilities...lets just say, we were lucky we had what we had. We arrived in the afternoon and so all the kids had gone home from school.



It was apparent that a lot of thought and consideration had gone into what was already there. Considering the road had only been open for a month or so the work that had been done in setting up the marquees and clearing of the rubble looked impressive but it was clear to see that it was only the beginning of what looks like a long road. We met some of the teachers that were still present there but not many. All looked happy to see us there and so were very welcoming.



The next day Sam and Zahid and I went for a little half hour hike up to Village Danna to get a better understanding of all that was around us. From there you could see a lot of the valley and we saw that there were houses all the way up most of the sides of the valley. All rubble now though, which was disheartening. The valley was beautiful but it was clear to see that the people living there had been through immense hardships in the last few months. And that was only to survive. After that Sam, Rauf and I worked on our little assignment of the boundary wall.



The next day we waited for a jeep for a while but it never came so we were invited by some of the kids to come and sit with them in their class and talk to them. This was very eye opening. I was told by the kids how far they actually traveled from just to come to school. A journey that made my half an hour hike to university every morning look like a doodle. The kids seemed very interested in us and especially Sam. They asked a fair few

questions and we tried to do the same. In the end of it all I must say that they surprised me with their wiliness to learn and also their willingness to find happiness after months of sadness. I also got the feeling that most of them were very grateful that the school was being rebuilt and that gave them the drive to continue coming and studying when they could so easily have decided not to. We walked down to the main road in the end with some of the kids helping us with our luggage. On arrival in Islamabad Sam and I went to see Dr Ayaz Khan and it was decided that the two of us would go up to Bhunja again after we had been to Lahore for a week for some site seeing.



For our second trip we decided to make it a longer one. A week to ten days was the plan. This time our main plan was to sort out some discrepancies with the boundary drawing that we made and also the result of the children's exams were due so it was decided that we make boxes for the donated gifts for the Girls and Boys Primary Schools and wrap the bought gifts for the High school. It was decided to award the children that had actually gone to school and done a lot of work, considering the circumstances, managing either one of the top three positions in each class.



We left on Friday the 23rd of June spending most of the day stopping at the offices of various organizations that we were involved with in one way or the other. Here we had different responses with some being very helpful and welcoming where as others showed their beurocratic side.

The following is a day by day activity list for this trip:

- 23rd June: Traveled to Bhunja.
- 24th June: Sorted out the donated toys to be used as awards.

- 25th June: Trekged up to Bhurjan at 3000 meters. Played cricket with the locals.
- 26th June: Came back to Bhunja and spent the day resting and recovering.
- 27th June: Made 35 cardboard boxes and packed the awards for the Boys and Girls Primary School.
- 28th June: Wrapped the Primary Schools' awards and in the after noon went over the boundary drawing.
- 29th June: Wrapped the High School awards and finished the work on the boundary drawing.
- 30th June: Results announced. Awards distributed in the Boys Primary School and the High School.
- 31st June: Dr Ayaz Khan arrived with friends. Discussed in depth what the future of the school site was.
- 1st July: Attended a local elders meeting, chaired by Dr Ayaz Khan Left for home.



Early on this trip we also hiked up the valley to place called Bhurjan. This was at the top of the valley at one side at above 10,000 feet. The locals used to move up here during the summer months to graze their life stock as well as use it as a recreational retreat for the weekends. Here we played cricket with some of the locals and we were very surprised to find a cricket pitch set up at this height. It was very hard work running and playing up here.



For this trip we had one of the locals and his son as our guides. The son was fairly young, early primary school but all the way up he ran circles around all of us. He had so much energy that we eventually nicknamed him Mirchi. Eventually we were told that he had two other brothers who died as the schools collapsed and we wondered if his hyperactivity and energy was trying to make up for their loss. This is the point I started to think about the psychological affects that the earthquake would have had on not only the children and the locals but the teachers as well.



Throughout our trips we talked to a lot of people. We got the viewpoints of a lot of people as well. Hearing people's tales of where they were when it happened, how they initially reacted, and how for days they did not know what to do except just to try to survive. I would tell some of these stories but not without their permission. As a conclusion though I can say, each person has his own story. Each person's story is disheartening and it is a miracle to see them smile and get on with their lives again. Later one day Sam and I were looking at the photos that were taken when the valley was first visited by KLWT and Sam commented about how distressed the children looked and how much happier they look now. It is the same kids but now they have a lot more hope and that is through the efforts of KLWT and Dr Ayaz Khan with their endless energy and the daring to take on something so meaningful.