

# Stockbroker climbs Himalayas, helps poor below

BY JAY GROSSMAN  
STAFF WRITER

A year ago, Rochester Hills city councilman Gary Peters traveled to distant Nepal to climb the Himalayas. A year later, he returned to see the land below.

Peters spent two weeks in the village of Tirkhu, and a third week on a photo safari in Chitwan Park, home to the Bengal tiger and black-horned rhinoceros.

The trip was organized in part by the Karnali Institute, a non-profit global organization that aids undeveloped regions. Peters was one of only seven Americans to participate.

It's not the type of trip you'd expect the manager of a stock brokerage firm to take, but Peters said his return visit to Nepal was a chance to help others.

"I wanted to go back to help the people," he explained, sitting over a hamburger at Mr. B's. "I know

it sounds corny, but I thought I could help make a difference."

The view from atop the Himalayas was quite different from the one below.

An endless mountain skyline is replaced by stark images of poverty in Tirkhu: children begging, families without proper food, narrow streets, a crowded marketplace, and people walking around with open wounds that haven't been treated.

"A tremendous country when it comes to beauty," Peters said of Nepal. "But the people are living on the edge."

On the edge of poverty. On the edge of democracy. On the edge of a mountain.

His journey, which began with a 22-hour flight in late September, took him to the rural village in the Chauda-Bisa valley, one of the most backward areas in Nepal.

Tirkhu is surrounded by mountains and has no main road leading in or out of it. The closest road is more than 100 miles away, and the nearest village more than six hours away on foot.

About 400 people live in Tirkhu. The village has no electricity, and as many as 12 to 15 family members might live in a single hut of less than 500 square feet.

The mission of the Karnali Institute is to first take the time to understand a culture before making economic or technological changes.

So the first task for Peters was to get to know the people.

Surrounded by China and India, Nepal held its first multi-party election in 1991. The Democratic Congress Party and the Communist Party are the country's major political parties. Hinduism is the dominant religion.

The economy is agrarian-based.

But as Peters pointed out, most farmers only grow enough to feed their own families.

He first noticed how friendly the people were toward him. Many families invited him to their homes to eat, even though it was obvious they could hardly feed themselves.

A second, more striking feature was the lack of medical care in Tirkhu.

Peters met one village woman in her 20s who had given birth to 12 children. Eleven of the children died before they reached their first birthday; the 12th was very ill.

The father gave the child medicine, but used village water — which is very contaminated and the source of many diseases.

Peters tried convincing the man to boil the water, but the father said the boiled water would be bad for the baby's stomach.

Peters then suggested taking the baby to a nearby clinic. But again the family refused; the clinic is four or five hours away from Tirkhu on foot and usually there is no doctor available. And the medicine at the clinic has often expired.

A bad diet and a poor standard of living contribute to the poor health. Families cook with fire, but don't build chimneys in their huts because they don't want the heat to escape.

Consequently, many villagers suffer from respiratory diseases.

The Hindu religion includes a sense of fatalism, leaving a person

to accept whatever disease afflicts them — another reason why many villagers in Tirkhu will not treat a wound or an infection, Peters said.

Sanitation is a major problem, and villagers literally will relieve themselves just about anywhere. "It's like the fly capital of the world," Peters said.

The problems are endless, but hidden beneath them is a village grappling with tradition while adapting to Western culture.

The major status symbols in Tirkhu are portable radios and wristwatches. But the radios run on batteries, which are hard to place when they die.

In many huts, there are radios prominently displayed that do not work.

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