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Local & Region

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WHEN HONORS FIND YOU

By Randy Wyrick
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KATHMANDU, Nepal — Pemba Sherpa wasn't looking for honors or awards when he and others launched the Sherpa Foundation in 2015.

He was trying to keep the Sherpa Foundation's work under the radar, to avoid government interference. But it's tough to keep a low profile when you rebuild 23 homes and repair and renovate 140 more. Throw in a few monasteries for good measure, and people notice.

So there he was in Nepal's capitol building standing before Nepal's first female president, Bidhya Devi Bhandari, and flanked by the prime minister and other high-ranking Nepali officials receiving Nepal's highest award, the Medal of Honor.

"To see all those people — the president, the prime minister and so many others — in one place, and I was also in that place, it was amazing," Pemba said. "I am so blessed to receive this from Nepal's first female president."

In Nepalese, the Medal of Honor is Jana (Public) Sewa (Serving) Shri (Highest Honor) Paduk (Medal or Award).

"We use the same name in the U.S. for bravery in battle," said Dana Dunbar, one of the Sherpa Foundation's pillars.

THREE TIMES AROUND THE WORLD

Pemba has made three trips to Nepal in the last year, which is located on the other side of our planet.

There's a short video clip of the ride Pemba took to the ceremony. He's in the police chief's vehicle. Kathmandu's two top-ranking police officials are in the back seat, and Pemba is in the front.

"I walked in with them and people kept saluting me," Pemba said smiling.

He was Nepali national television to talk about the Sherpa Foundation's work in Nepal and the United States, and during the interview the reporter snarked, "How do we know you did all this?"

Pemba smiled softly and quietly replied, "It's right along the trekking route that thousands of tourists walk through



Pemba Sherpa awarded Nepal's Medal of Honor for the Sherpa Foundation's work

YANJI SHERPA | SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

the Everest region. You can take a stroll and see for yourself."

The nominations start at the grassroots level and trickle up. They start at the local level, then to the district, and finally to the national government where the hope is that it lands on the right desk and the person behind it is in a good mood. Pemba learned about his Medal of Honor when a mayor from the Everest region contacted him.

The ceremony was scheduled for May 5, but due to unforeseen events, it was pushed back to May 26.

"The day I got the award was like a dream. I still wasn't expecting it," Pemba said. "We did not start out to achieve an award like this, but it's good to be recognized for all the time and work, and sleepless nights. In all the fundraising and public speaking, I didn't think we were doing as much as the disasters. But when you calculate it all, much has been accomplished."

RAINBOWS AND RAIN

During another trip, he buttonholed Um Hong Gil, the legendary climber

from South Korea. In this world there are 16 8,000-meter peaks. Gil has climbed all of them. He spends most of his money building schools, community centers and medical facilities. Pemba was chatting with friends at an official function in Kathmandu when they were introduced. Pemba asked Gil for some help rebuilding a 500-year old Buddhist temple destroyed in the 2015 earthquakes and their aftershocks.

Gil agreed, and brought a TV crew and some of his trekking buddies to the dedication ceremony, and put the squeeze on them to help pay for it. They did.

"I feel so blessed to be able to meet people like this," Pemba said.

That dedication was May 13, the heart of Nepal's monsoon season. The sky cleared and there was a rainbow ring around the sun, which the Buddhist monks say bodes well for the monastery's future. That, and the fact that it was reconstructed on concrete pillars to make it earthquake resistant.

"When people with clear hearts get together, miracles happen," Pemba said smiling.

PEMBA SHERPA, A10

Pemba Sherpa was awarded Nepal's Medal of Honor for the Sherpa Foundation's work with Nepalese earthquake victims. The Medal of Honor is presented by Nepal's first female president, Bidhya Devi Bhandari. The Sherpa Foundation's annual fundraiser is scheduled for 5 p.m., Thursday, June 29, at the Eagle-Vail Pavilion.

ABOUT THE SHERPA FOUNDATION

- The Sherpa Foundation's annual fundraiser is scheduled for 5 p.m., Thursday, June 29, at the Eagle-Vail Pavilion.
- To help, or for more information, go to www.sherpafoundation.org.

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PEMBA SHERPA

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Pemba had left Nepal 10 days before the April 2015 earthquakes and aftershocks killed thousands of people and left tens of thousands homeless. He was still getting over the jet lag when her received the news.

"The needs of the Everest region were great, even before the earthquakes and the devastation," Pemba said.

MONEY GOES TO NEPAL

The Sherpa Foundation pours more than 90 percent of the money it raises into Nepalese villages, where's it's most needed. There is no overhead and no

administrative costs.

"No one gets paid," Dunbar said. Sherpa Painting, Pemba's Vail Valley business, is doing well enough that he can keep running the Sherpa Foundation. He says he's thankful to the contractors and homeowners who work with the business.

"They're helping the Sherpa Foundation, as well," he said.

October 2016 he took a group of Vail Valley volunteers on a trek to Everest Base Camp, and to help work on some houses the Sherpa Foundation was rebuilding.

"It was good to have them along to see the disaster and devastation, and to show how the rebuilding projects are progressing," Pemba said.

Sara and Travis Fahrney were among them, and brought their son and daughter. It'll change your perspective about life, and about what people in Third World countries have to do to survive, Pemba said.

PEMBA KNOWS POVERTY

Pemba knows all that and more. He was born poor. His father was a porter in the Everest region, but was deaf, so he took Pemba everywhere he went to be his hearing aid.

Pemba was 12 years old when he led his first trek, 26 days with a father and son from Germany. He met them at Lukla airport — the world's most dangerous. The Germans were hesitant to trust

their lives to one so young, but Pemba recalls that other guides convinced them that they were in good hands.

They were back at the airport at the end of those 26 days and they told Pemba he was still too young and that he needed to be in school.

So Pemba asked them if they would sponsor him at the English school in Kathmandu. They did, and he studied there three years.

In 1995, Pemba led a group of Coloradans up Mount Kangchenjunga, the world's third highest peak.

Pemba was still young, and they invited him to come to the U.S. to live with them and learn English.

"They taught me on dining room tables, in cars while traveling, in churches, in high school, anywhere we were," Pemba said.

He's still in contact with both the German family and those Coloradans. Frank Ziegler, the German son, has supported the Sherpa Foundation.

"The people who supported me when I was young also support the Sherpa Foundation," Pemba said. "Being here in The U.S. opened my eyes to the most prosperous country in the world, where the possibility of progress is unlimited."

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