



For one ex-lawyer, a broken ankle led to a mission to help needy children, writes **Yvonne Lai**

Revel with a cause

For octogenarian community worker Olga Murray, charity has sometimes started at a bar. "When I came to introduce my foundation for the first time last year, [our host] had a very nice event for us at the Kee Club," the sprightly 84-year-old recalls. "I was blown away by [D'Aguiar Street] spilling over with young people talking, drinking and having fun - TGIF on steroids!"

Murray has returned to Hong Kong for a five-day trip to network and further publicise her non-profit Nepalese Youth Opportunity Foundation (NYOF), which supports more than 3,000 young Nepalis from primary school through to college or vocational training.

Despite her intense schedule, the American managed to squeeze in some Friday night fun at her old haunt on Wellington Street.

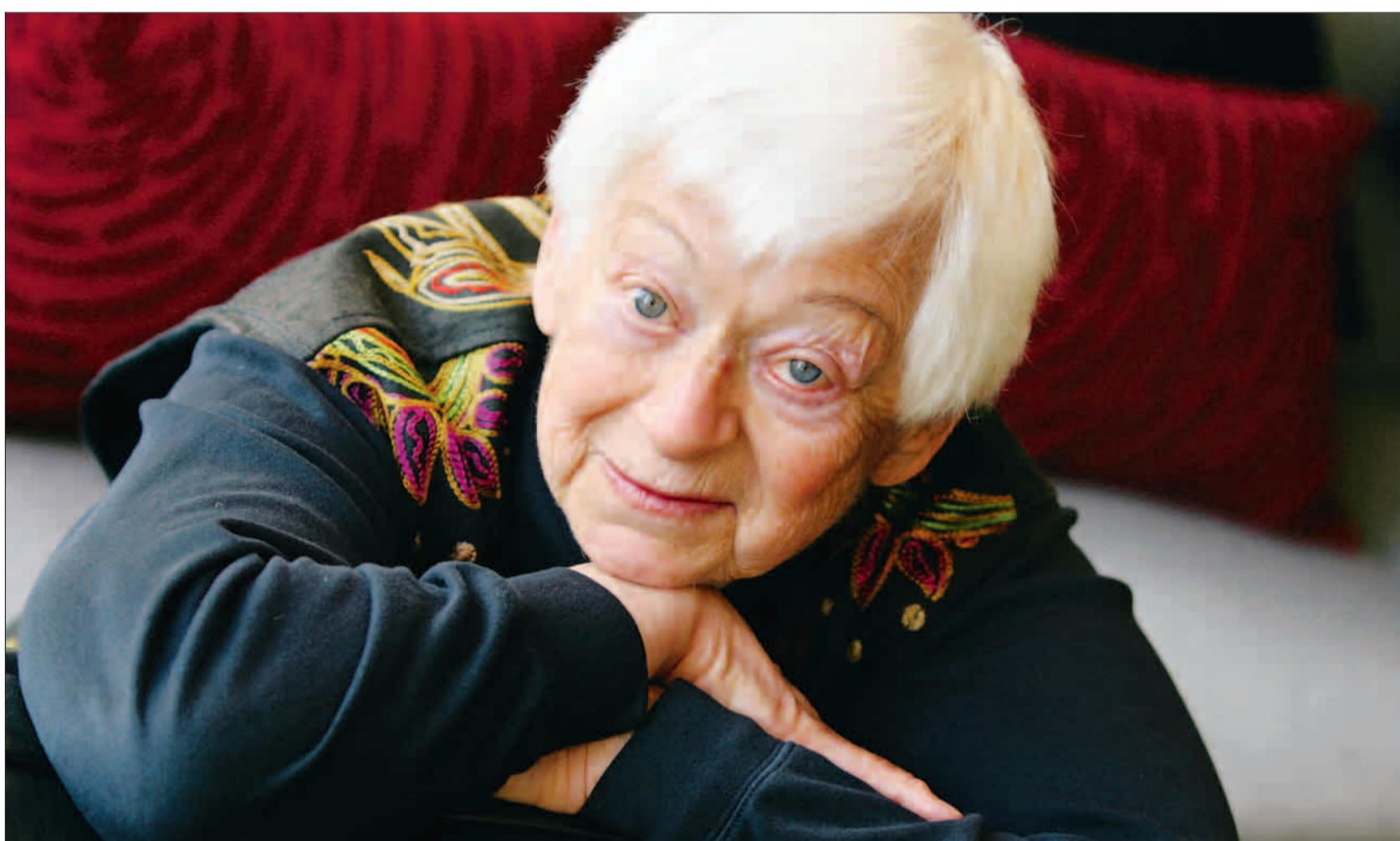
"I'm just never tired," Murray says. "I think it's because I have a positive outlook on life. Also, it must be in the genes; my mother lived to the age of 98 and she was out and about until the last weeks."

Her optimism and energy are most infectious when Murray broaches the subjects of Nepal's changing social landscape and her own involvement through NYOF.

One of the foundation's eight current projects is the Indentured Daughters programme, through which girls as young as seven are freed from bonded labour to attend school. In exchange for their daughter's freedom, parents are offered a goat or a piglet, which is roughly equal in value to the cash paid by labour contractors for a year of indentured servitude.

The practice of bonding is a modern form of the kamaiya system, which especially affected the Tharu people of western Nepal, who farmed their own land for millennia until settlers displaced whole families into serfdom. After the debt system was abolished in 2000, the Tharu people have continued to sell their daughters at the January festival of Maghe Sankranti.

NYOF's programme, which began in 2000 in Dang district, multiplied several-fold when Murray presented it two years later



Olga Murray (left), on a visit to Hong Kong to publicise her foundation for young Nepalis; Murray with the Tharu people of western Nepal (below). Photos: Jonathan Wong, Nepalese Youth Opportunity Foundation



on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. She chuckles. "When I tried to speak about [other programmes, such as] our homes for impoverished children or our Nutritional Rehabilitation Homes for severely malnourished kids, Oprah would interrupt with, 'Listen folks, for US\$100 you can buy a piglet and save a girl from bondage!'"

Now 10,000 girls have been freed, and their communities meet regularly at anti-bonding awareness clubs set up by NYOF and its partners, Murray says. And the former lawyer continues to lobby the Nepalese government to eradicate this illegal practice.

The high-profile media and award circuit - while being a crucial part of Murray's work - is a far cry from the rural landscape of Nepal, the original inspiration for her work of the past 23 years.

"I saw all these children dressed in rags, and most of them were malnourished, yet they seemed happier than the average American kid," she recalls of her first trek in the Nepalese mountains in 1984. "What was it about the place? I wanted to know what the secret was."

Then 59, Murray was nearing the end of her 37-year career as a Californian Supreme Court lawyer and contemplating her next step. Struck in turn by the extreme poverty and resilience of the Nepali people, "in a flash, I knew what I would do for the rest of my life".

On her second trip in 1987, Murray broke her ankle while trekking and was treated by a young doctor who had opened a small rural hospital for disabled children. Through this connection, Murray began meeting community workers, volunteering and donating.

She began using her own money for college scholarships for five 16-year-old orphans, two of whom are now teachers and two work in computer science. By 1990, she saw a need to start a foundation that would help children in an organised way with education, housing, medical care and loving support.

Twenty years on, Murray remains the only foreigner at NYOF's Kathmandu headquarters, and she likes it that way.

"There is no way I can deal with the subtleties of Nepali society, and I rely on our wonderful staff for that. In rural areas [80 per cent of Nepal] where Americans are on the Maoists' terrorism list, one Maoist

leader said [about NYOF programmes] that if they had the money, this is what they would do," Murray says.

One local Maoist commander threatened to stop the Indentured Daughters programme, when he found out where the funding came from. Without directly countering the orders to pull out, local NYOF co-ordinator Man Bahadur Chhetri was able to galvanise the community in peaceful protest, prompting the commander to back down.

It was also Chhetri, along with NYOF executive director Som Paneru, who came up with the offering of a piglet or goat; local women warned against giving their husbands cash as it would likely be squandered on alcohol.

"You have to know how to work with a particular culture," Murray concludes, "otherwise you do more harm than good."

Until trekking brought her to Nepal, Murray never imagined that she would travel 12,000 kilometres from her Sausalito home to fulfil her calling of working with children; but her understanding of empowering the weak has its roots in her own upbringing and legal career.

Born Olga Davis in 1925 in Sztatmar, Romania, Murray emigrated with her family to the east coast of the US at the age of six.

Of growing up in a family of four children, Murray says: "My parents were optimistic and upbeat, kind and funny. They really loved us and we didn't even know we were poor."

All these children dressed in rags ... yet they seemed happier than the average American kid

Olga Murray recalls her first trek in the Nepalese mountains in 1984

"My father, in particular, led more by example than statements; we grew up feeling like we could do anything."

After graduating from Columbia University, she went on to study law at the George Washington University in Washington, where there were only three or four other women in her class.

"When I was at law school, the great fear among the women was looking for a job," Murray recalls.

"There was no such thing as a woman lawyer in firms back then; judges ... and the clients would have laughed you out of court. Sandra Day O'Connor [later to become the first female member of the federal Supreme Court] graduated second or third in her class at Stanford and was offered a job as a secretary."

Despite the odds, Murray was offered the first job she applied for - as staff attorney to the chief justice in California, where she had settled in 1955. She worked for the state until her retirement in 1992. Murray helped write decisions in the areas of children's and women's rights.

"I was never aggressively [feminist]. It never occurred to me that just because I was a woman, I couldn't become a lawyer."

She is keen to pass on her leadership skills and knowledge of influencing government to her NYOF family.

"Last January, we gathered 400 formerly bonded girls in Kathmandu; they marched and chanted, carried banners, gave out leaflets and performed street plays all over the city. We arranged interviews for them with the prime minister and the president and the UN human rights people and lots of local press."

In July, the government passed a budget allocating US\$1.6 million for the education of the returned girls. Murray says the NYOF will continue to rescue the girls until the practice of bonding is completely wiped out; she believes the day is not far from now.

Meanwhile, the freeing up of resources has allowed the foundation to take on new projects, such as building hostels in remote areas where children have to walk four hours each way to and from school, and a new scholarship programme for young women of the "untouchable" dalit caste.

"Our strategy - which sounds like a haphazard model - is growing organically; from seeing a need, to being enraged by it and thinking that we can do something about it. That's how we started most of our programmes."

When she is not travelling to publicise and raise funds for NYOF,

Murray spends at least six months out of the year in Nepal, where her Kathmandu home is just a stone's throw from J and K House, her two children's homes.

"It's the smallest part of our programme financially [there are 40 children total], but in my heart it is one of the most important. Those are the kids I worry about the most. Seeing them come in as little tiny things - having lived in jail with their parents or on the street - and grow from there until they graduate from college; it's the most satisfying thing you can imagine. The past 25 years have been the happiest of my life."

This autumn, Murray's two grown grandsons - one of whom has already done volunteer work in Nepal - will accompany her to Kathmandu. "I usually go in early October for Dashain festival - which is Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, everything rolled into one. It's a huge family holiday and a time for parents to bless their children."

"I go for that to be sure to give a tika [red sandalwood paste to dot the forehead in blessing] to the children and celebrate the holiday with them."

"We have a reputation that we stick with our kids," Murray says. "A lot of outfits going into the country will have a two- or three-year grant, come in, and abandon things once the money runs out. We don't have that kind of restriction. We have to see the children we support being self-sufficient."

That's certainly something worth raising a glass or two to.



Children receive support right up until they graduate from college or complete vocational training

Shear terror as religious police give youngsters a dressing down

Ali Musa Abdi

Armed with assault rifles and scissors, the Shebab's religious police are imposing a reign of terror - as well as crew cuts and bushy beards - on Somalia's youth.

Wearing a T-shirt with a Western print, a pair of tight jeans and wavy gelled back hair, Ahmed Aydarus Abdi is a dedicated follower of fashion, but not the style advocated in the Shebab's hardline Wahhabi brand of Islam.

"I was stopped by Shebab gunmen who ... said the way I designed my hair was very silly," he says. "Without waiting for my reply, one of the gunmen pulled out a pair of scissors and cut off huge locks on one side of my head. He was dealing with it like it was grass, not human hair."

As he recounted how he had to

finish the job himself, the 19-year-old cast worried glances around him, aware that his appearance was likely still offensive to the canons of Shebab sartorial elegance.

His friends urged him to comply. "If he had tried to defend his right to wear his hair the way he chooses, he would have been lashed in public, so we restrained him," 20-year-old Mohamoud Hassan says. "He was humiliated and cried after we left."

Fear runs high in the streets of Mogadishu, where residents are bracing for a huge offensive led by government troops and African Union forces against the Shebab-led insurgents. The Shebab, whose leadership recently proclaimed allegiance to Al-Qaeda, control about 80 per cent of the country.

While the Shebab's "Jaysh al-Ustra" (army of suffering) is planting

bombs and preparing to counter their enemy, the movement's "Jaysh al-Hisbah" (army of morality) is keeping civilians in check.

Units known as the Islamic social mobilisation brigades criss-cross the busiest parts of town to blare instructions through loudspeakers: calls to join the global jihad, give to the poor and respect a pure Islamic clothing style.

The population is routinely reminded by preachers in mosques that a full veil is recommended for women while Islamic gowns, short hair and long beards are more becoming for men.

Many youths are outraged but complaining too loudly is not an option.

"What is this? The Shebab are claiming to have political authority but they are behaving like fashion designers. What do they have to do

with the way we dress or do our hair?" says one indignant 21-year-old in Mogadishu.

He asked to be named only as Abdullahi: "You see, I live in the Bakara market area," he says, referring to the capital's main Shebab bastion.

Not all young people disagree with the Shebab's strict dress code, at least not in public.

"I support the way of life being promoted by the Shebab. They are following Allah's laws," says Amina Abdurahman, a 23-year-old woman.

She argues that France and Turkey apply equally draconian rules by banning headscarves. "I haven't heard the world condemning France or Turkey, but they take every chance to denounce the Shebab and the Taliban."

One youth in Adle village, near Mogadishu, recounted how his



Shebab's dress code includes short hair and long beards for men. Photo: AFP

house was raided by Shebab following a tip-off as he was watching a pirated copy of a film called *Ninja Killer* with friends.

"Most of us jumped out the windows. Unfortunately, I was one of the six who got caught and flogged for misconduct," Abdulle Moalin Hassan says.

Fear of the religious police has other consequences on people's daily lives.

When buses drive into Shebab-controlled areas, the driver only needs to shout *is haggajiya* (rearrange) for the men and women to hastily split and take seats in their respective ends of the vehicle.

"I tell the passengers to split in two groups when we approach Shebab areas. They can't be mixed, especially if they are not married," says Mogadishu bus driver Ali Mohamed.

Local Shebab "governor" Ali Mohamed Hussein recently explained to bus owners that the ladies should be seated at the back "to have enough ventilation because they are wearing the hijab approved by Allah".

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