

Tackling Everest: A Vancouver woman's odyssey holds hope for Nepalese girls

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Vancouverite Pushpa Chandra will be celebrating her 50th birthday at the peak of the world. The naturopathic physician is one of two Canadians to qualify for the Everest Marathon, the highest and hardest marathon on Earth, according to the Guinness Book of World Records. Held on December 5th, athletes from around the world compete for one of seventy-five spots and the opportunity to test their mettle in life-threatening altitudes and temperatures as low as -20 degrees Celsius. And the event is more than simply a race. A registered charity, the Everest Marathon Fund's mandate is to promote health and education in rural Nepal. Runners fundraise for months prior to the event and one-hundred per cent of the funds are donated to selected charities. After researching the situation in Nepal, Chandra has decided to direct all her funds toward sending Nepalese girls to school.

"Seventy percent of girls in Nepal don't have access to any education. Thirty-five percent of children die before they turn five," says Chandra. "It all comes back to education. If you haven't been taught, how can you protect your child from dying from an unclean water supply?"

Nepal is one of the five poorest countries in the world, with an average annual income of \$200 U.S. Due to this, Chandra notes that it won't take much money to begin to educate Nepalese girls, but the potential for shifting the entire culture to a new paradigm of health and well-being is tremendous. Her vision is to assist in the launch of a new program specific to the education of girls and to actively recruit girls for this program.

Meanwhile, the training for the race is rigorous, with runners expected to complete in double their best time. Unlike other marathons where athletes taper training for two to three weeks prior to events, Everest is preceded by sixteen days of trekking through the Himalayan foothills for six to seven hours a day and camping out in sub-zero temperatures, to reach a starting line of 17,000 feet. At this height, atmospheric oxygen is half of what humans are accustomed to but runners are not permitted to supplement by carrying oxygen. Constant medical

examinations ensure athletes are able to sustain the trials of the competition, which exposes them to the risk of cerebral edema and pulmonary edema.

If she's a seasoned marathoner, Chandra is also no stranger to relief work. She served as a nurse for twenty years before qualifying as a naturopath and has worked in India and Fiji. And Nepal holds a deep significance for Chandra, whose heritage is Indo-Nepalese. An Ironman Canada triathlete with thirty-five marathons under her belt including Boston and New York, Chandra says that the drive to race Everest has a spiritual genesis. "It's the mountain, and mountains are gods in our (Hindu) culture. Everest is the mother of all mountain gods."

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