

Philip Holmes

After the death of his wife 20 years ago, British Army dentist Philip Holmes set up a charity in Nepal that rescued hundreds of children from jails and circuses. Having written his memoir, he talks to Fionnuala McHugh.

MEETING ESTHER We met, by chance, on a ski-lift in Austria, in 1985. The first word that springs to mind about her is “intriguing”. I was 25 and a dentist in the British Army, stationed in Germany. Esther was a Dutch-Jewish lady. She was a social worker in Holland, working with survivors of the concentration camps and their families. People would open up to her and tell her all these things about Auschwitz and Treblinka that they couldn’t tell anyone else. From that, she developed an interest in social justice and she began studying law in her spare time. She got her master’s in law in 1988, the year we got married. After she died, in 1999, one of her friends told me, “She chose you”, and she’d made that very clear. In some ways, because of the army, we hadn’t seen that much of each other before we got married. But it worked extremely well, with the one exception of not having any children. That was a large part of the reason why she took her own life.

DUTY BOUND If you’re in that situation of finding your wife’s body, you either fold or focus. I stayed in total self-control. Maybe it’s a Northern Irish Presbyterian upbringing, which is pretty buttoned-up. And after 17 years in the army, you get on with it, you do your duty and what’s expected of you. Those were Esther’s values, too. Once you harness the emotions generated by a tragedy in a positive direction, then it’s amazing what you can achieve. I just knew I would perish myself if I continued with dentistry. My response to her suicide note about childlessness was to set up a children’s charity in Nepal. The link with Nepal was very tenuous: Esther and I had been living in Church Crookham (in Hampshire), which was then the UK base for the Brigade of Gurkhas, and we had Nepali neighbours. I’d never been to Asia, never mind Nepal. I’d zero experience of running a charity. I’d no experience, tragically, of being a parent. But I took that one-line note as a challenge, as well as a statement of why she’d done what she’d done and, 20 years down the line, I’m still responding to that.

CHILD PRISONERS When I went to Nepal, in November 1999, I’d set up the charity in Esther’s name (the Esther Benjamins Trust) in which I’d invested £38,000 (then worth HK\$485,000), the lump sum I’d got from leaving the army. But I really had no idea what I was going to do with it. Then I saw a front-page photo in *The Kathmandu Post* of some kids inside a prison. It said their parents were in jail and they were in jail, too, in the absence of any social provision for them. They’d done nothing wrong but they were de facto prisoners. It said there were about 100 children in 20 jails across the country and I thought, “That’s a big number but it’s not a massive number.” So that’s what led to those first seven kids coming out of jail, on December 4, 1999, 11 months to the day after Esther’s death. That morning, in



Philip Holmes in Britain, on June 23. Portrait: Helena Darbyshire

a backstreet, I suddenly burst into tears. It came out of nowhere, it needed an outlet somewhere private. It had been a year of quite solid personal discipline.

HONG KONG CONNECTION The kids went to the refuge I’d set up – I hate the term “children’s home”. It was a place where they could stay until their parents were released. Life takes strange turns. There was me setting up a charity for Nepal in the UK but I felt it was born in Hong Kong. A friend, Ronnie Ford, was head of art at Sha Tin College and thanks to him and his wife, Carol, the *South China Morning Post* did a story. Then *The Daily Telegraph* picked it up, then *The Boston Globe*, and it went round the world. And suddenly, out of the blue, on Children’s Day in November 2001, the Nepali government outlawed dependent children in jails. I can’t claim cause and effect but we’d raised awareness and it must have become internationally embarrassing.

CIRCUS RINGS That was when I decided to shift focus. I stumbled upon circuses, anecdotally – a colleague went down to India and someone said there was a circus in the area with Nepali children and that, after the show, “private arrangements” could be made. Essentially, hundreds of Nepali children were, again, de facto prisoners. We started a rescue programme, which involved me going to live in Nepal in 2004 for what I thought was going to be two years and turned out to be eight. By that stage, I’d remarried. In 2000, I’d met Bev (Waymark), who was a television producer. She’d read about me and contacted me to come on a show. That led to dinner and we were married in 2002. One of our other motives in moving to Nepal was that we had an interest in adopting. In 2006, we got Alisha and, in 2009, Joe. We also rescued 700 children in circus raids and put 19 traffickers in jail. In April 2011, India’s Supreme Court ruled that children under the age of 18 should not be used in circuses any more.

RESCUE AND REFUGE In 2012, we went home. I came back a much wiser person. Hopefully, you carry that wisdom into the future. I also felt it was time to move on from the Esther Benjamins Trust. I’d become more interested in the child-

rescue side of things, in rehabilitation and trauma management. An amazing woman, Shailaja CM, had been central to the eventual success of the circus programme. She’s now the operational director for ChoraChori (which means “children” in Nepali – Holmes was its British co-founder in 2015), where we’re dealing with child-rape victims. We’ve just taken in a girl who’d been kidnapped by four men and they’d raped her every day for three months. Do you know, there’s even worse cases than that? There are little girls staying in our refuge – seven, eight, nine years old – and they haven’t even the vocabulary to describe what’s happened to them. There’s a girl there, aged nine, who’s grey-haired. It’s a long-term commitment. You can’t undo what’s been done. But you can make a difference. I want to find those guys and put them away for a very long time, like the child-traffickers.

SOWING SEEDS Although I live in Devon, I go to Nepal about every three months. I’m trying, constantly, to up my game. I’ve had these amazing 20 years and I’m looking forward to the next 20. I don’t want to get into a situation where you simply fade away, as old soldiers do. Writing (his memoir) *Gates of Bronze* was quite a cathartic process – at one stage, I was drafting it as a letter to Esther and feeling a huge sense of release and relief. Writing allows you to park a certain phase in your life. When I started out I was doing what I was doing in memory of her. But increasingly, you’re doing things to support your colleagues and to set an example to your children. Esther sowed seeds within me – she shared her sense of social justice – and the book continues that sowing-the-seeds process in Alisha and Joe. I’ve been blessed to have children. They’re free to do what they want but it would be wonderful if, in years to come, they decide to put something back into Nepal. I’d be very surprised if they didn’t. Certainly, I’m wed to the country for life. ■

Philip Holmes’ memoir, Gates of Bronze, is available to order or download at www.gatesofbronze.com. For more information about ChoraChori, go to www.chorachori.org.uk