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## Nivita's heart of gold

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Nivita Sharma and Peter Hopgood unload medical supplies at the Sigatoka Hospital. Picture: SUPPLIED

A PHILANTHROPIC spirit has forged the most unlikely of friendships between the general manager of one of Fiji's most popular resorts and a young woman from the United States of America.

In 2013, when Nivita Sharma was a 16-year-old high school student living in Kennesaw City, Georgia, she decided she was going to do something for Fiji, the birthplace of her parents.

She raised funds and gave medical supplies to the Sigatoka Hospital and clinics from Lomawai to Korovisilou.

While staying at the Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort and Spa during the medical mission, she met resort general manager Peter Hopgood.

"He encouraged me to continue the work I was doing and come back with more," she said.

In 2014, fuelled with the overwhelming response from her previous mission and better informed of the needs in Fiji, she returned with more medical supplies.

"I was again encouraged by Mr Hopgood to keep up with my mission and to enable me to do that I established a legal non-profit charity called EqualMed.

"The vision of EqualMed is a world in which every human being has equitable access to quality healthcare."

In June this year, EqualMed shipped a 20-foot container of medical supplies worth \$400,000 which arrived in the country last Friday.

"The supplies will be donated to various hospitals including Sigatoka, Rakiraki, CWM, Lautoka, Nausori, and Labasa, Savusavu and Taveuni, and clinics and nursing stations in other parts of Fiji and to Diabetes Fiji."

When she delivered medical supplies to the Sigatoka Hospital last week, Mr Hopgood welcomed Ms Sharma and organised the unloading of the truck.

He then gave her a tour of the new maternity ward that he played a leading role in establishing.

The Outrigger Fiji GM has taken a keen interest in the hospital and monitors it on a regular basis to ensure that patients are taken care of and facilities are up to date.

For Ms Sharma, Sigatoka has a special place in her heart because this is where her parents and grandparents were born.

"A lot of people know my dad. Some people even stop us when we are in Sigatoka and greet us," she said.

Her grandmother, Sarita Sharma, was well known in Sigatoka for her charity and community service work in the 1970s and 1980s.

She was active in activities for the hospital, Red Cross and the special school.

"She also did a lot of work for the poor through the Sigatoka Women's Club and so

on. "In some ways, I am continuing the work of my grandmother."

Ms Sharma heads back to Sigatoka next week and in partnership with Mr Hopgood and Outrigger, will reach out to schools in remote areas to contribute first-aid kits she brought from the US.

Mr Hopgood said as GM for Outrigger and chairman of the Coral Coast Chapter of the Fiji Hotel and Tourism Association, he commended Ms Sharma for her dedication and hard work in bringing medical supplies to Fiji.

"It has not been easy for her," Mr Hopgood said.

"She has overcome many challenges including logistical difficulties, transport, lack of engagement with several hospitals as well as the enormous distances she has had to travel over the past three weeks.

"I personally can't believe that one so young has so much to give.

"On behalf of the people of Nadroga-Navosa, we thank Nivita and her family for their love and generosity."