

Spreading happiness AMONG STREET MONGRELS

Strubel – he is the hero around Boudha. Many of you might not know him yet but he is the reason and inspiration for a cause that has helped rescue and rehabilitate many like him.

Strubel was once infected with CTVT (Canine Transmissible Venereal Tumor), a sexually transmitted disease, as a result of which he had to be castrated. Now, while he lazes around the grand white stupa enjoying the sunny Saturday morning, without a care in the world, his human friends are out catching his dog friends. Saturdays at Boudha is a day of health and hygiene treatments for the dogs; and a day of gratifying service for the volunteers of the Street Dog Care (SDC) Camp.

According to the Kathmandu Animal Treatment (KAT) Centre, there are over 35,000 stray dogs wandering the streets of Kathmandu Valley, and most live in miserable conditions, suffering from abuse, malnutrition and diseases. Strubel was one such dog, till he got lucky once he caught attention of Andrea Bringmann, founder of SDC.

"We Help Dogs" reads a sign at the mobile booth of Street Dog Care camp set right in front of the main entrance to the Boudha Stupa. Bringmann, the cheering founder, is busy with her volunteers managing records with pictures and case files of different dogs. All the while, Strupie, an anxious looking dog strolls around the booth whereas an adorable dog named Brownbear rests at its foot.

The day's program is to give rabies vaccinations and necessary treatments.

"We normally treat 10 dogs on average but the program is really about trying to give some happiness to the dogs," shares Bringmann, patting



volunteerism
text UJJWALA MAHARJAN
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The special shampoos and lotions they use have been donated from Switzerland. It relieves dogs from itching and helps their fur to grow back.

"Once we had this lotion used over Tashi who had lost all fur due to mange, and then the fur grew back so beautifully, it was like a magic lotion," shares Franziska Oertle, a Swiss volunteer working closely with Andrea. She also writes an autobiographical newsletter from Strubel's perspective in their website www.streetdogcare.org. Oertle adds shaking Strubel's paws, "It's really fun working with dogs and we do it for no other reason than that we just love dogs."

Since the camps are held in public areas, they attract a lot of attention and help build community awareness and support. Often, people approach Andrea on the spot and offer to help out.

Pat Frietsci was one of those people. He came across the camp last September when he was strolling around the stupa, and has been working with SDC since then. Andrea introduces Pat and shares how he'd wake up early in the morning to look for infected dogs and carry them over to the treatment centre at Maharajgunj in taxi.

A small black puppy, badly infected with mange, is brought at the camp by one of the volunteers. While people gathered around the booth comment that the puppy is not likely to survive, Andrea is still hopeful and decides to take it to their newly opened center at Paika for special treatment.

The puppy is named after Pat, both of them being so skinny.

"Yes, Pat looks really fragile, but we've had some amazing success stories," he says with a smile, "Strupie was run over by a bike and couldn't walk. But now he's all happy and fun loving. Another dog's mouth was all blown up with tumor but he recovered wonderfully after some treatments."

He bends to pat Yeni, another dog that will be taken to the center, and adds, "Tough dogs in Kathmandu, eh!"

Andrea has been running the camp with help from her friends and volunteers and says it has not been too expensive or too hard.

"Anyone is welcome to volunteer for us and even stay at the center. But they have to love dogs," she says.

It's 11 in the morning, and as they start wrapping up for the day, most of the volunteers stay behind playing with the dogs. Ultimately, it did seem that the program was not about giving vaccinations or baths or sterilizing the street dogs, but it really was just about making them happy. Strubel is happy!



Strupie who looks amused. While some volunteers spread out looking for street dogs, some gather around a dog named Sally and prepare her for a bath.

Sally seems dejected and ailing. She is infected with mange, a skin disease caused by parasitic mites that causes hair loss and the formation of scabs and lesions.

"Because stray dogs are in constant contact, it's really hard to prevent the disease unless we seclude and cure them," informs Parisha Thapa, a local veterinarian who recently got involved in SDC.

As Parisha and the team lather up Sally with antibacterial shampoo, she gathers a huge audience. Sally, on her part, seems to be enjoying her open bath and being the centre of attraction for once without any looks of contempt.

A long way from Dang

An honest smile and a presence that personify positive energy are hard to come across in a place like Nepal. The enduring antagonism amid traditions and modernity has left many tired and caught between schisms on grounded societal demands and the daring inner necessity for self-fulfillment.

However, a few brave voices and their incessant personal efforts are testimony that dreams are for the making.

Meet Balika Chaudhary. She is not sure how old she is, and if it were not for the apparent signs of life's grievances on her face, her smile denotes the same enthusiasm for life as a young child's.

"I assume I'm around 30," she guesses.

Born in the small village of Bhagwargaon in Dang, Balika's family is one of many Tharu families that fled their ancestral hometown to Bardiya in the early 1980's.

"It was really difficult for our people there. The ruling caste wouldn't leave any daughters untouched, and so we had to flee," she says. This was just one of the many frustrations that took Balika and her family of 10 to Bardiya as Kamaiyas, or bonded/indentured laborers.

For a family of 10, working to make ends meet on someone else's land was no joke.

"In the beginning, we literally lived in a one-room shack, and if we ate in the morning, the evening meal was never guaranteed," she laments. For her family, even musuroko madh (red pulse broth) and piseko jau (ground barley) were never taken for granted.

"If we had roti, the older ones got a whole and the younger ones were given half each," she recalls.

Economic disparity aside, what troubled Balika the most was the rigid structural positioning of women in her society and in her own family. She was not allowed to go to school, and the rhetoric behind it was the same as what has been heard many a time. In her family's eyes, there was just no point in investing in an education for her, a girl, because she was to be married off eventually in any case.

"They saw my education and possible subsequent success of no use to them," she conveys with a heavy sigh.

On the contrary, she not only went to school but also joined a local youth club. "It was all done through lying, sneaking around and sometimes even stealing," she shares.

When Balika was chosen to attend a local three-day leadership training program, through the youth club, she was forced to make a real choice.

The response of her family was upsetting, je sukai gar, marne bhayepani mar ("Do whatever, even die if you choose").

She left home that night,

suicidal in thought with nowhere to go. Through a chance encounter with a man who later became her counselor and mentor, she was convinced

that her fight was not yet over.

She persevered through school. Having failed the English paper in her SLC exams, she went to tuition classes, seven

kilometers from her home at four in the morning everyday, with money she had found, picked up and collected over the years.

This struggle meant nothing for her family, whose economic stability had grown over time. They had moved from being kamaiya-s to sukumbasi-s (squatters) and finally the rightful owners of their very own plot of land.

College came knocking, and for the first time, Balika was overwhelmed with her family's stance on her education. She needed Rs 1,800 for enrollment; the rest was to be taken care of by the Tharu Bidhyarthi Pariwar, a local NGO. Her family's persistence to deny her an education, despite being capable of handling the enrolment fee, baffled Balika. She managed to find her way to classes all the same, but the thought behind their refusal never left her.

Balika was chosen to represent her college in Kathmandu, and her family again looked the other way. More opportunities came her way, and she found her real passion in street theater in 2002.

There has been no turning back since then for Balika.

"Street theatre became my life," she says. Nepal was in a state of emergency, and often she felt as though "in

front of me were the army, behind were the Maoists, and there we were performing in the middle."

Her obvious talents in street drama landed her the opportunity to go to India and Denmark. Before taking off for the latter, she made another attempt to find solace in her family, but alas. In Denmark, she learned to channel her frustrations into her work; and when she came back, she was a celebrity of sorts.

"I was getting film offers, and people from NGOs wanted to hire me," she declares proudly. Her family finally agreed to come along to her premiere of a local Tharu film. Their subsequent breaking into tears at the end of the show made them realize what Balika was indeed capable of.

After working a few years with various youth groups in her region, Balika now works for Search for Common Ground, an INGO. Her passion for drama has not taken the backseat, however.

People now ask her how she got to where she is now, and what political affiliations she has. She says, "Only I know where I came from and how I got here. But I suppose, as they say, you can't know where you're going, until you know where you've been."

And that is genuine going for Balika Choudhary from Dang.



BUJAY GAJMER