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## WKU Panhellenic Council donates \$10k for Nepalese women's education

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Dr. Aruna Uprety (center with glasses), founder of STOP Girl Trafficking, on-the-ground team near the border of western Nepal and India. Moore : "porous" border, which does not require a visa to pass.

Submitted

A donation from Western Kentucky University's Panhellenic Council will help 90 female students stay in school on the other side of the world.

The nonprofit Circle of Sisterhood Foundation announced this week that the council funded a \$10,000 grant to the American Himalayan Foundation, providing students in Nepal with uniforms, materials, safety training and more.

Sam Bodemann, the former council president who helped oversee the donation, said the organization chose the AHF among a pool of several grant-seeking organizations collected by Circle of Sisterhood.

She said knowing how the funds will be used has been "heartwarming."

"I know I voted for them because it just really stood out to me that we are helping them educationally and (combatting) the possibilities of being trafficked and enslaved," Bodemann said. "That's why everyone felt like that was the route to go."

Bodemann said the \$10,000 came directly from the council's budget. They could have saved it for their own operations, Bodemann said, but funding the Circle of Sisterhood grant "seemed like a lot better way to spend our budget."

AHF Senior Director of Program Bruce Moore said the contribution will go toward the foundation's STOP Girl Trafficking (SGT) program. In addition to necessary

materials, students are given additional classes, teachers, support from alum groups and check-ins from advocates.

“Human trafficking is a significant problem in Nepal,” Moore said. “The numbers are not known, but it's estimated somewhere between 8,000 and 16,000 women each year, most usually for sexual slavery in India.”

AHF's work, with help from implementing partner Rural Health and Education Services Trust, took root in 1993 during the AIDS crisis when infected women were barred from returning to Nepal.

A delegation led by Dr. Aruna Uprety dispatched to Nepal found conditions for many women to be dire, Moore said.

“In the process of being on this delegation, Aruna met with a number of women who had young girls who were trafficked, and one of them in particular stuck in her mind, this woman who was dying,” Moore said. “(The woman) told her, ‘Don't worry about them, it's too late – go back to the villages where they came from and stop it from happening to other girls.’ ”

Uprety did just that.

AHF took an interest in her work in 1997 and soon introduced the SGT program, aimed at combatting trafficking through educational opportunities. Moore said the program has since helped 132,000 girls, with 12,000 enrolled this year.

Moore said AHF's research showed that the majority of trafficking victims did not attend school, often exacerbated by a lack of interest among Nepalese families in educating women. As a strongly patriarchal society, a married woman usually leaves her birth family to join her husband's, he said.

"There's a saying in Nepal that 'educating a girl is like watering a flower in another man's garden,' " Moore said. "It means that the other family will get the benefits of your investment in your daughter's education. You won't see it yourself."

That saying, which was included in AHF's grant proposal, caught the attention of many readers at the Panhellenic Council and at Circle of Sisterhood.

"When I hear that, I feel like that's what the Circle of Sisterhood Foundation (addresses)," Bodemann said. "We're here to uplift other women and make sure they are reaching all the benefits they should be given."

"That's what the Circle of Sisterhood Foundation does – they water these girls like a flower to help them flourish."

Circle of Sisterhood's grants team leader Sue Fussell said the organization has worked to "remove barriers to education for girls and women here in the states and across the globe" for over a decade.

Fussell said much of their work involves partnering with campus groups, sorority organizations, women's advocacy groups and more to organize and fund a wide variety of projects.

“We are working in areas from directly funding K-12 education or tuition for vocational, technical or university education, to things like menstrual health management and hygiene programs, to infrastructure, like putting electricity in a girls' school,” Fussell said. “I could go on with all sorts of examples.”

She added that the work of the SGT program is “particularly important” and serves a highly vulnerable population of young women, aligning well with the values and goals of Circle of Sisterhood.

“The United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals have said that when you educate girls and women, the world will change,” Fussell said. “Women reinvest in their communities and their families. Teenage or unwanted pregnancies go down. There’s so many things impacted when you choose to educate them.”

The grant award not only speaks highly to the work of the AHF, but also to the thoughtfulness of those on the Panhellenic Council who funded it, Fussell said.

“Every day, (council members) are supporting things beyond themselves, and they as a community unified to raise money and support education for girls somewhere

else,” Fussell said. “I would turn the spotlight back on them because that’s where it belongs, as well as the folks doing the work in Nepal.”

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## Michael Collins

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