

The Himalayan

ON S A T U R D A Y



KCC facility boasts the world's highest Walltopia indoor training wall at 3,840 metres

Photos: Courtesy Amrit Ale

Hope springs from ashes of tragedy

A death on a mountain urges this US duo to build a training facility that will ensure safety of climbing Sherpas and high altitude workers

Rajan Pokhrel
Kathmandu

It was in 2002 and an American couple trekked to the village of Phortse in Solukhumbu district to begin their climbing activities on the world's highest mountain.

"We had decided to do some ice climbing at Phortse before heading to the Everest Base Camp along with our Sherpa guides," recounted Jennifer Lowe-Anker adding that all the Sherpa guides were fascinated watching them climb.

Jennifer, an artist and author, talked to Conrad Anker, her climbing partner, to contribute something to the Khumbu people, from which they could learn safe climbing techniques.

"The Sherpa guides' reaction inspired us to give back to the locals," she shared.

Hence, the concept for the Khumbu Climbing Centre (KCC) was conceived. "But, frankly speaking, the idea for KCC stemmed from a tragedy," said Jennifer while talking to this daily in Kathmandu. Jennifer's husband Alex Lowe, who was a world-renowned alpine climber, had died in an avalanche on Sishapangma in Tibet when he was there with Conrad on a ski expedition in 1999.

According to Jennifer, losing Alex she likened to what it must be like when a member of any climbing Sherpa family dies.

In 2003, Jennifer, who later married Conrad, launched a project to build the 'Khumbu Climbing Centre' in Phortse through the Alex Lowe Charitable Foundation (ALCF). "The Foundation was set up immediately after Alex's death while his first project was carried out in Mongolia," she added.

According to Conrad, he became close to Jennifer after Alex's death, who he married later. "We saw what happens when someone responsible for a family loses his life," said Conrad, a renowned climber who located George Mallory's body on Mt Everest, and added, "So, our goal was to make climbing safer."

They both knew that there was tremendous loss of life amongst the Sherpa community on Mt Everest. "We knew that one of the main reasons behind the tragic incidents could be attributed to lack of proper training for high altitude workers."

The Montana-based couple launched the KCC project with a mission to increase the safety margin for Nepali climbers and high altitude workers by encouraging responsible climbing practices in a supportive and



Courtesy: Karl Swingle Media

community-based programme.

To materialise the KCC project, ALCF brought together the who's who in the climbing world including the world's foremost high-altitude mountaineer Peter Athans, Jon Krakauer, an accomplished mountaineer and renowned author of *Into Thin Air* and *Into the Wild*, Steve Mock, Steve Swenson, Chris Lohss, Sten Anderson and Gordon Wiltsie among others.

"Over 16 years, we have seen more than 1,300 graduates from KCC as they learned technical climbing skills including belay techniques, knot tying and how to use ice tools, vital to their safety," the couple shared.

Formally opened on June 12, KCC has a new earthquake resistant and passive solar building with outdoor training walls, walltopia indoor climbing wall, mountaineering library and a medical clinic.

"The KCC facility boasts the highest Walltopia indoor training wall in the world at 3,840 metres while the wall was designed by Gohm Bigwood of Momentun Gyms and Ryan Walters who constructed it onsite," Conrad informed.

Ferrying some of the construction materials from Kathmandu was quite challenging, recounted Jiban Ghimire, Managing Director at Shangri-La Ne-

pal Treks, who provided logistic support to the KCC facility.

In 2007, two families — Lhakpa Dorje, Nawang and Karma Tsering, and Panuru and Pasang Diki generously donated land for the KCC building, while from 2008-2010, graduate students from the Montana State University School of Architecture launched and completed a design collaboration with Phortse village under the direction of Prof Mike Everts.

"Dean Soderberg from the US oversaw the initial ground-breaking and construction work. Completion of the facility was in phases with a four year push since the 2015 earth-

quake," Jennifer shared. "While the volunteers carried out construction work of KCC, we added English language programme because proper communication in any dangerous situations is important."

Jennifer believes that English is the lingua franca in most of the mountains. "Lila, wife of Barry Bishop, also trekked to the Everest region to open English language class."

According to Jennifer, the KCC facility, built with a cost of Rs 74 million, was a collaborative effort.

"Its training is safeguarding all Himalayan climbers who employ Nepali guides and high alti-

KCC's earthquake resistant and passive solar building features training walls, library and medical clinic

tude workers during the climbing season," Conrad said, adding that it has not only been supporting them but also safeguarding the indigenous climbing community in Nepal.

Each winter for two weeks, technical climbing skills are taught along with English language, mountain safety, rescue, and wilderness first aid. "In the beginning, our instructors were qualified western climbers and guides who had experience in

the Himalayas. Most of the teachers now are Nepalis."

The KCC is home to the technical climbing school and gym, the Jon Johnston Mountaineering Library, and the Magic Yeti Children's Library which are overseen by the ALCF and KCC board. The libraries have a collection of over 1,200 mountaineering books donated by American Alpine Club member Bill Felstner of California. The medical clinic inside the KCC facility is being overseen by the Himalayan Trust. It has also been serving as a community centre and earthquake refuge for the village of Phortse at an altitude of above 3,800m. In recent years, there were over 500 KCC graduates working on Mt Everest in the main climbing season.

"It is our hope that the KCC will thrive under direction of the local KCC and Phortse leadership," said Jennifer.

Amrit Ale, Phunuru Sherpa, Ang Dawa Sherpa and Danuru Sherpa will be managing and overseeing the facility as its doors were opened on June 12, which was also a celebration to recognise years of planning, building and rebuilding, learning, development, growth and gratitude, countless hours spent by volunteers from around the world, local workers, tremendously talented craftsmen and women.

It is a labour of love for a community extending far beyond the terraced fields and lives of those instrumental to KCC's establishment. It's also a celebration of opportunity for a whole new generation of climbers as well as traders — men and women, artists, lodge owners, farmers, teachers, specialists, among others.

A lot of volunteers worked for the project over the past years. Now the community owns it. There is no debt, and the building is completely paid for.

"I also must stress how grateful we are to the many western volunteer instructors and builders who came to contribute time or oversee the construction," said Jennifer.

Phillip Henderson who has 20 years experience at the National Outdoor Leadership School will be onsite this coming September to help initiate the business plan and operations, Jennifer, also the ALCF President, concluded.

Performers at the formal opening of KCC on June 12



Conrad Anker and Jennifer Lowe-Anker

