

DONATE

TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

An eight-hour Bhutanese trek inspired two New Yorkers to save a run-down monastery

BY MATT DELLINGER

Think what you will about karma; this much is for certain: Michael Reynolds and Eric Hoffman would never have given \$31,000 to a monastery in the Himalayas if they hadn't spent the least comfortable night of their lives there.

Reynolds, 41, a style editor and set designer, and Hoffman, 36, an art director, have been together for nine years and have shared a passion for world travel and an omnivorous appetite for spiritual inspiration. Large-scale philanthropy, however, was never a hobby. Their charitable giving, Reynolds says, was pretty much limited to "dropping some s— off at Housing Works," a chain of nonprofit thrift stores in Manhattan.

That was before their vacation to Bhutan. In 2004, Wangy Tsering, an acquaintance of Reynolds's father and a Bhutanese emissary to the United Nations, helped arrange a trip to the Buddhist nation, which the two men toured with a guide named Namgay Tenzin. In the city of Punakha, Tenzin bypassed a large monastery that is popular with tourists and took his guests on an eight-hour trek up to the secluded Sewala monastery, where very few Westerners have gone. Tenzin had never been there either, but he took the pair to the direction of a very holy local lama.

It's not clear what the lama had in mind, but Hoffman and Reynolds came to see their excursion as a sort of fateful pilgrimage. It was just after the monsoon season, and the steep path was muddy as the men followed



Michael Reynolds's pictures from visits to Sewala Monastery. This page, top: the new dormitory. Opposite page, top left: Reynolds and Eric Hoffman with the young monks.

To see more photos from the couple's trip, go to wsjmagazine.com

For more on the charity, visit bhutanfound.org/sewala



They sat down in the cold evening to eat with the monks in a crude sheet-metal shed. 'The donkeys, the dogs, everybody ate in there,' Hoffman says

behind a platoon of monks and donkeys. "I thought I was going to drop dead," Reynolds remembers. After an ascent of more than 3,000 feet, they pierced the cloud cover and reached the monastery, sweaty and bleeding from leech bites.

A few dozen monks, many of them orphans, most ranging in age from 12 to 22, greeted the two men, gave them clean robes to wear and invited them to evening prayers. Hoffman and Reynolds took digital photos of the boys, then showed them their faces on the small screen. "They were all huddling around, giggling, pushing to get their picture taken," Reynolds says. "I think we fell in love with the kids—being up there, watching them chanting, seeing their conditions, their bare feet." The beauty of the surroundings—snowcapped peaks in the distance, a river valley below, and "the clean-

est air you've ever breathed," Reynolds says—was in pointed contrast to the monastery, which was crumbling from neglect.

"None of the rooms they showed us could function," Hoffman says of the nearly 300-year-old monastery. With Tenzin translating, they sat down in the cold evening to eat with the monks in a crude sheet-metal shed. "The donkeys, the dogs, everybody ate in there," Hoffman says. That night, the two men slept atop mildewed mats on the floor in a room with Tenzin.

The next day, before leaving, Hoffman and Reynolds made an offering of about \$500 cash, much to the astonishment of the monk in charge. Later, they remained in email contact with a monk in Punakha, and a few more times they sent small donations for food and robes, but it never felt like enough. Finally, in 2006, Reynolds came up with the idea of donating a building to supplement the original structure. They had lunch with Tsering, who put them in touch with an architect in Bhutan.

Buildings in Bhutan follow a traditional style, making for straightforward design—a rectangular white-plastered stone façade with hand-carved wooden window frames and doorways—and Reynolds and Hoffman monitored the construction via photographs sent by email. They wanted to be certain that every cent of their donation went to Sewala and that the gift would be tax-deductible, so they contacted the Bhutan Foundation in Washington, D.C., and its president, Bruce Bunting, agreed to channel the full amount to Sewala without even charging for the wire fees. The monks opened a bank account just for the dormitory project, and on February 20, 2007, the couple took a deep breath and wired the money—\$31,231 all told.

Bunting says the foundation usually concentrates on more prominent landmarks in Bhutan, and he considers Hoffman and Reynolds's gift "major and very generous." Compared to the trickle of money the tiny monastery gets from its patrons within Bhutan, the couple's offering was a tidal wave.

Last October, Reynolds and Hoffman went back to see their work completed. As they came up through the clouds, the monks started blowing horns and banging drums. "It was insane," Reynolds recalls. "We were given so much love." The boys proudly showed off their new dormitory, with two classrooms on the first floor, eight shared bedrooms on the second floor, and an open third floor. Thanks to the new construction, there were twice as many monks now, who were very happy to see their benefactors—especially upon discovering they had brought Halloween candy.

For their part, Reynolds and Hoffman say the payoff was huge. They hope to continue giving to other causes in different parts of the world. But it may be difficult for them to find another mission with which they connect as personally as they did with Sewala. "We cared about these people," Reynolds says. "It wasn't, 'I want to save the whales.' It was, 'I know a whale I want to save.'" ♦