

My Personal Story

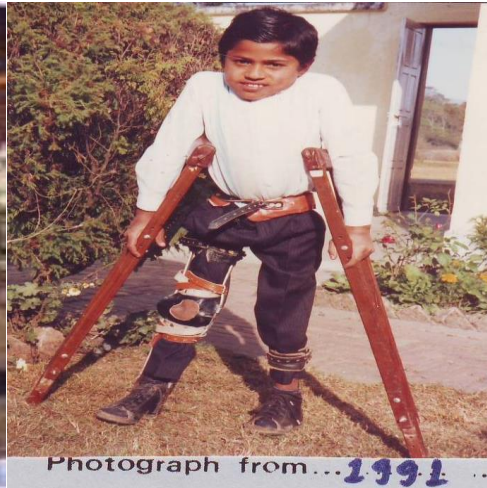
Dr. Raju Dhakal, Nepal

The day April 18, 1982 was the happiest moment for my family and villagers when I was born as the fourth member of my family, after 3 consecutive sisters. I was a loving, playful and brilliant child. One day when I was 2 years old, I had been playing almost the entire day, unlike normally, with clay and stone on a hot, humid, summer day near my home. That evening, I developed a high-grade fever, diarrhea and vomiting. By the third day, I was unconscious, my whole body paralyzed. There were no doctors, hospitals, roads, electricity or vaccines available. We had to rely on a local faith healer (called Dhaami and Jhankri in Nepal). Unfortunately, the faith healer had no effect on my condition. I was then taken to Kathmandu for treatment. Visits to different hospitals proved disappointing. My parents were told, "Your son has polio. It's already too late, he has to live with the paralysis."

We returned back to our village. I spent the next 5-6 years with crippling paralysis, crawling to get around. I received no rehabilitation or assistive devices. My activity was limited and my participation in society restricted. I became totally handicapped. I was a burden for my family, who had to cater to all my needs, and society. Schooling was impossible, with only one school in the whole village. People used to say that my condition was a result of sin which I committed in the past."

I showed a keen interest in academics, and my family decided to send me to a better place for a chance at a bright future. It was my great fortune. The turning point of my life began when some of my relatives told us about SOS Children's Village, an independent non-governmental developmental organization which had been working to meet the needs and protect the interests and rights of children. I still remember the day when I first time saw that friends like me were playing with joy and happiness together in the beautiful homey environment, which I had not ever imagined before.

There were moments of joy, happiness and love for which every orphan children is dying to have. In the SOS Children's Village, I learned to love and to be loved. After being the part of family of SOS Children's Village, I even forgot I had disability.



I was operated on three times at Terre Des Hommes (now HRDC) from 1990-1991 for post-polio contracture. After extensive medical rehabilitation, I was able to walk with bilateral calipers and elbow crutches. This was the happiest moment of my life. For the first time, my feet, not hands and knees, stepped on the ground. My dreams came true when I was able to go to school independently with the help of these assistive devices. My performance was extraordinary compared to my friends in school, which became another motivating force to attend higher secondary school.

College life was comparatively different and difficult because of inaccessible infrastructure and attitudes towards those with a disability. Despite some hurdles and



Photograph from Dec. 2003

difficulties, I managed to complete higher secondary educational board in science stream in first division.

There was another great challenge ahead of me, though. I wanted to be a doctor!

Pursuing medicine as a career for a person with disability in a developing country such as Nepal is a tough journey full of doubts and uncertainty. It is, at times, seemingly impossible. After a successful medical entrance examination, and with the full support of SOS Children`s Village, I got the opportunity to go to medical school at Kathmandu Medical College and Teaching Hospital. That was another happy moment in my life. I was always trying to be honest, loyal and committed towards my aims and truly honor the investment of my Village. I finished my Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degree with good marks,

enjoying each and every moment. I was the only student with a disability studying medicine. My presence in medical college was even a source of inspiration to others. I made many good friends, took part in every social activity and won the gold medal in table tennis twice while competing against my non-disabled friends. Every time, my



Concert during college

friends cheered for my victory and success. I began to feel that in every step along the way, victory was just waiting to kiss me. I accomplished all this at college, I believe, because I had already overcome so many struggles and barriers. Every time, I celebrated my ability but never complained about my disability.

Without the support of SOS, treatment at HRDC and friends, I imagine I would have been somewhere in the corner on a muddy floor of that same remote house I grew up in, where even healthy people had to walk two full days to catch the bus. Thinking about studying medicine was beyond my imagination considering that there was not even a single person in the area who has studied medicine at the time.



Now, as a professional, I am trying to put 100% of my efforts into being an agent of change. I know there are so many doctors who can diagnose the patient and prescribe medicine, **BUT** I want to do more than that. I want to contribute to Medical Rehabilitation. For that, my journey has already started. For the last two years, after completing my MBBS degree, I have been

working at Kathmandu Medical College and Teaching Hospital as a medical officer at Community Hospital, Duwakot. At the same time, I was also teaching first and second-year medical students.

Medical Rehabilitation is the most neglected part of our health care system in Nepal. There are only a few rehabilitation centers which are run by international agencies. When I joined Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre as a medical officer, I felt that, finally, I was on my way to exploring my main area of interest in rehabilitation. I had been to Delhi, India to Indian Spinal Injury



Presenting a paper at IRF Conference

Rehabilitation Centre and Dublin, Ireland to National Rehabilitation Hospital for training and observership. I presented a paper at the ISCoS/ASCoN , IRF conference and at many national-level conferences. I was awarded an ASCoN fellowship for my paper. I am enjoying my work and am very happy that my expertise and knowledge is working to bring new life, happiness and hope to those like me.



NRH, Dublin (ASCoN Fellowship Award)

Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and spinal cord medicine has not existed until lately in Nepal. Finally, with a determined heart, I decided to go to United States of America to earn my Doctor of Medicine (MD) in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, so that after completion, I could return to Nepal and promote medical rehabilitation. Realizing the value of the aim and the vastness of field to be explored, I thought just a MBBS was not sufficient. So, I started to prepare for United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE). With hard work and commitment, I managed to pass United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step-1 and Step-2 with good scores.



One of the sadder moments of my life occurred when I was rejected three times for an entry visa to sit for the 3rd exam of the USMLE Step-II (Clinical Skills), though I had already paid, booked my spot and completed the requirements of the Education Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG). My colleagues were granted entry visas for the same exam, but not me. I felt all my dreams would not come

true and that my hard work would be wasted because of one decision. I was helpless, hopeless and thinking and complaining of my disability rather than ability. For the next few months, I could not decide what to do? Where should I go to achieve my goal?

Thanks to God, I could forget that mental stress while working with patients with spinal cord injuries and seeing the condition of people with disabilities due to polio, CP, TBI and other neuromuscular disorders. I got the chance to meet a lot of good people who are working in the field of health, especially in rehabilitation medicine. After being mentored by two Canadian doctors - Dr. Claire Weeks, a SCI physician, and Prof. Peter Wings, a spinal surgeon - I am revived with new hope. The two work for SpiNepal, a charitable group within the University of British Columbia (UBC)



MD residency, PM&R, Dhaka, BSMMU

Department of Orthopaedics in Vancouver that has supported Nepalis with spinal injuries. I had been looking to earn an MD in PM&R in a different region. Fortunately, one medical university in Dhaka, Bangladesh accepted me into their residency program. SpiNepal has been supporting for my education.



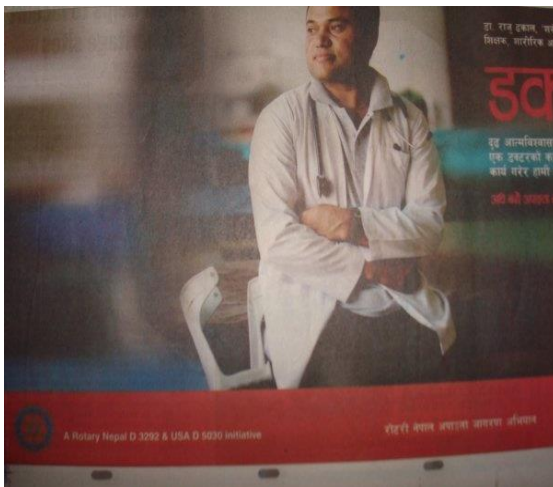
My wife and I at our wedding ceremony

Marriage and raising a family is another challenge for a person with a disability due to prevailing cultural myths and stigmas. However, after a 3-year love affair, I finally got married. We celebrated our wonderful wedding ceremony and now both of us are living happily in Dhaka and continuing our studies – myself, an MD in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, and my wife, a Master's in Public Health.

Social Works and Links

So many questions come to mind, how can I return and repay the people who helped me throughout my life? How can I use my expertise to contribute to society? Will I be able to bring about some changes for people with disabilities? Then I realized the importance of having social networks and links with national and international bodies. For that, I have already started my journey. Some of my initial steps are as follows:

- Friends/sponsor of SOS Children`s Village, Jorpati
- Founder Member of Growing Holistic Approaches for Rehabilitation(GHAR)
- Voluntary Role Model in Rotary International-Nepal Disability Awareness Campaign
- Links with:
 - International Spinal Cord Society
 - Asian Spinal Cord Network
 - International Rehabilitation Forum
 - Post-Polio Health International



Voluntary Role Model (Rotary Int'l)



SOS Children`s Village



Center, with Peter, Claire and other colleagues in ISCoS, e-Learn module

With the power of knowledge and expertise, I could help to bring back happiness and hope to those like me who are dying and lying on the bed hoping to be a true and productive citizen of society. At that moment, only then could I be totally honest and faithful.

Lastly, I believe destiny is not a matter of chance; it is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for; it is a thing to be achieved!

Special thanks to Joan L. Headley, Executive Director, Post-Polio Health International who has been very supportive and providing me the opportunity to write my personal story. ■