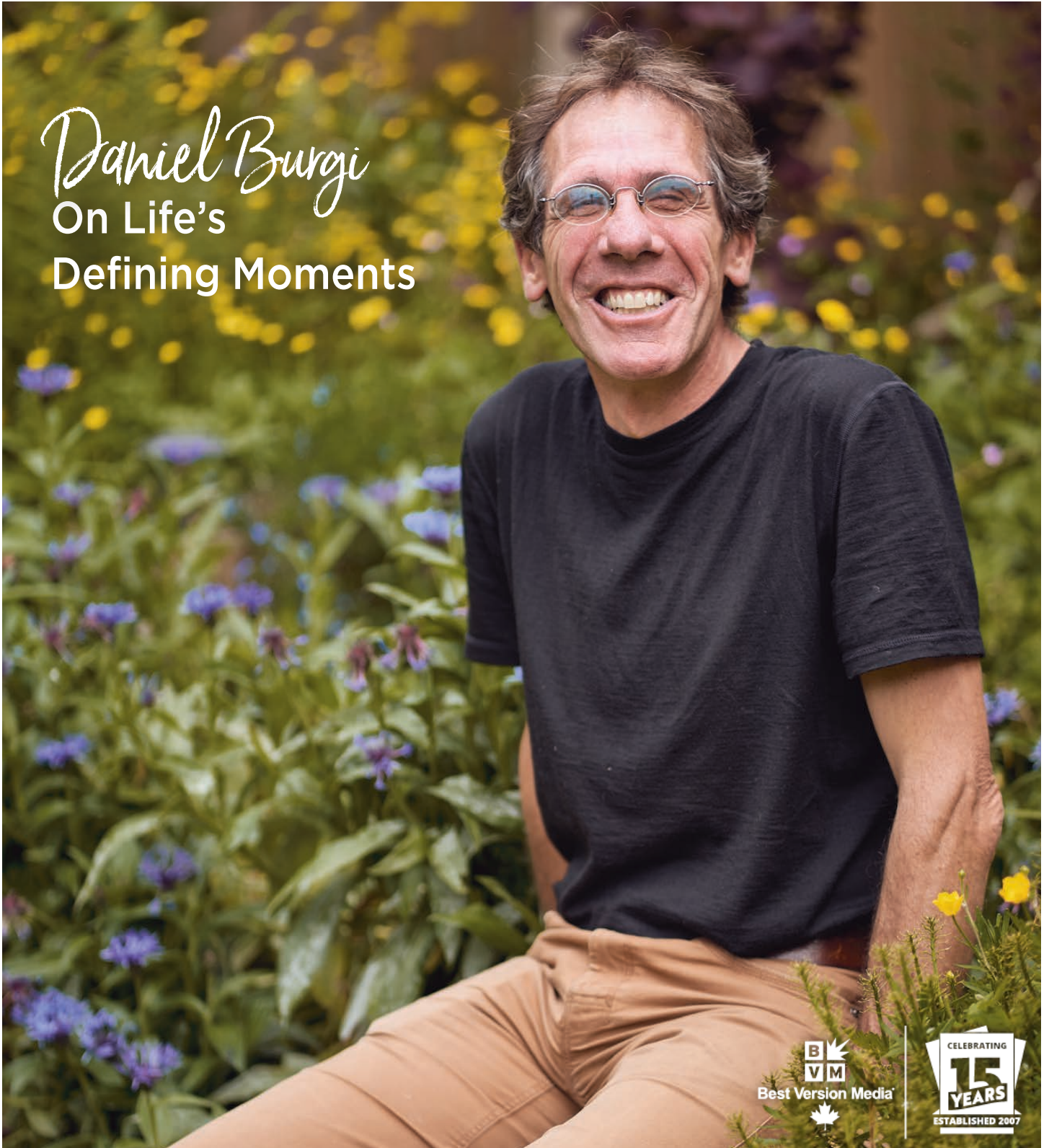


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An exclusive magazine for the neighbours of Edgemont

NEIGHBOURS OF EDGEMONT

Daniel Burgi
On Life's
Defining Moments



Cover photo by Deniz Merdano, Blackbird Works Photography



Daniel Burgi

On Life's Defining Moments

By Janine Tasaka
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& Daniel Burgi

"We've been rescuing, nurturing and protecting marginalized children in the Himalayas for over 20 years," says Daniel Burgi, founder and CEO of Himalayan Life. "Once your life crosses paths with children who have been abandoned, abused, and neglected, you can't help but intervene."

I was fascinated to learn more about Daniel's story and discover what led him to this heart-centred work in Nepal and India.

Born in Zurich, Daniel was educated in Switzerland, and his childhood was filled with beautiful memories of family road trips all over Europe. Daniel's sister worked as an au pair in Italy, so the family often visited her. Daniel remembers being six years old and travelling in an old decrepit car, adventuring with his family. "I cast my first fishing line ever in the Cinque Terre in Italy, which was completely unknown then!" he says. "It was just a lonely, quiet fishing village with some old guys showing me how to cast a line. We'd watch the fishing boats go out at dusk and come back at dawn with fish."

While working at a boys and girls summer camp in Switzerland, Daniel met fellow camp leader Karina. "It was the Christian version of camps doing wild outdoor stuff!" Karina was born in Switzerland and grew up in a rural town outside of Zurich. Her parents did international service work - her dad was a hospital administrator, and her mom was a nurse, so they had the opportunity to live in countries like Sudan. "When I met Karina, she had travelled extensively with her family, and it was embedded in her mind that she wanted to do something for the larger community," says Daniel.

When a friend of the couple was in Nepal for his medical studies, he got very sick. Their church group asked who would volunteer to go and help bring Luke home. "Karina and I decided to do it. We didn't even know where Nepal was at the time," Daniel remembers. "But we decided we wanted to go help."

That first trip to Nepal changed the course of their lives. "When we arrived, Luke was more ill than we thought, and we had to travel overland to India and finally got him on a plane home," he says. "I went back to the Himalayas after that first trip. I was backpacking and came face-to-face with a group of street children - it was one of those life-transforming encounters," he remembers.

Daniel tells the story of how he was about to board a train when he suddenly found himself engulfed by 20 rag-clad kids begging for food; their dirty hands were pawing at him desperately. Suddenly, the simplicity of living out of his backpack didn't seem "simple" any longer, and the money bag under his t-shirt - which protected his cash - seemed to burn like fire against his skin. His mind was racing. "What was I supposed to do?" Give them money? Buy them food? I had a train to catch but felt compelled to do something. I was utterly clueless about how to respond in that situation."

Perhaps sensing the sudden storm of emotions in Daniel's heart, the forty hands became increasingly demanding, pulling everywhere and on everything. Besides his backpack, he was carrying a plastic bag with half-squished bananas - more like banana peels - ready to be dumped in the next garbage can. Finally, in his helplessness, Daniel let go of the plastic bag, and the street kids immediately let go of him.

"The next few minutes played out in slow motion, and that scene has been forever engraved in my mind," says Daniel thoughtfully. "I looked over my shoulder and saw the kids fighting tooth and nail over the half-rotten bananas. I watched as one child got a hold of a banana peel, shoved it in his mouth and made a dash for it, with three others hard on his heels."



"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

~ Margaret Mead

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When Daniel returned home to Vancouver, he launched back into his work as an engineer, but he couldn't get the image of the Nepalese children out of his mind. At the time, he had enormous responsibilities and was managing a team of engineers; he was the head of Research and Development and the company's youngest vice-president.

"My job was very demanding, and I loved it, but whenever I looked at my computer screen, I would see banana peels. Any food I ate tasted like rotten bananas." Daniel started to spiral into a crisis. He questioned his incredibly privileged life with a formal education, job opportunities, health insurance, and abundant food. "Knowing there were kids who would fight to the hilt over rotten bananas, I just couldn't make sense of it all."

This crisis began to affect his relationship with Karina because he wasn't the same man he was before this experience in Nepal. "We went through a deep crisis together and decided we either needed to take a huge leap of faith and try new things, or it wouldn't work," says Daniel. "So, we both quit our jobs, left the county and went to try something new."

Daniel started the not-for-profit organization Himalayan Life when he decided he could do better than throwing a banana peel at a hungry child. "Our goal is to stand in the gap and care holistically for the kids in the Himalayas. We want to give them a chance to live – nothing more and nothing less."

Having founded the organization on the ground in India and Nepal, Daniel and his team opened a home for abandoned children so they would not become street children and would be spared the horrific experience of homelessness, survival by garbage scavenging, exploitation, public hatred, gang brutality, and addiction. They've initiated and run homes for children of families who have fallen into situations of bonded labour. They've contributed substantially to rebuilding in the Yangri Valley after the devastating earthquakes of 2015. And most recently, they built a school for the region's children to allow them to get a good education.

On a personal note, Daniel and Karina are parents to three children. Son Andy was born in an elevator in Switzerland 22 years ago. "That's not the preferred method," laughs Daniel. "We were in the hospital but didn't make it out of the elevator. When the doors opened on the maternity ward, the midwife was waiting for us, and there I was on the ground with Andy in my arms - it was hilarious!"

The family moved from Switzerland to Vancouver and this is where Stephie – now 20 – was born. "When we lived in Vancouver the first time, we came over as ESL students because, in Switzerland, we learned French, German and Italian, but we didn't know English."

After two years in Vancouver, they moved to Nepal and both kids did some schooling there. It was beautiful in the beginning, but it was during the Civil War, and it soon became impossible to live there, so the family relocated to Switzerland in the hopes that the kids would connect with their roots. Everyone wanted to be back in Canada within weeks of being in Switzerland. "We had to endure Steph singing 'Oh Canada' every single day in the shower," remembers Daniel.

Another defining moment that would forever change their world was when their first son Christoph passed away in Nepal when he was only three years old.

"Nepal is a society where early death in a family is commonplace," says Daniel. "Typically, in the Nepalese culture, babies are only named when they are two years old – they feel it's so much harder to say goodbye to a child once they've been given a name."

"While this was not our choice, and we wouldn't wish this painful experience on anyone, our son's passing forged a connection with the Nepalese people that we would not have made otherwise. It's simply not possible," says Daniel.

"The Christmas after Christoph passed away, all the holiday joy became too much for me, and I needed a break from it all, so I spent an hour or so by the river where Christoph's grave was. On the way back to the celebration, two boys who were part of our program came running across this huge open field towards me, and they both had candy. They gave me the candy and said, 'Uncle, we are your sons now.' The Nepalese mothers would visit Karina and share their stories of loss, and they would tell her, 'You are now one of us.'"

Years later, this large open field would become the site of Himalayan Life's Centre for abandoned children.

"That was 22 years ago, and it's interesting how the moments in life define you," says Daniel. "It wasn't our plan to build an organization, but part of it is definitely connected



with the passing of our son. You just want to glean every inch of meaning from these things in life. I've come to understand and very much appreciate the strength of my family."

To learn more about Himalayan Life, visit himalayanlife.com.

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