

# THE HIGHEST HIGHS





# & THE LOWEST LOWS

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After meeting Daniel Burgi in 2018 on a motorcycle tour in Nepal, Misti Hurst was inspired by his charity, Himalayan Life. Here, Misti reveals how he went from a curious backpacker to cycling over the world's highest mountain passes in aid of vulnerable children

WORDS: MISTI HURST



**W**hen Daniel Burgi was backpacking with his wife Karina in Nepal more than 25 years ago, a group of ragtag street children approached him on a train platform, begging for food and money. Suddenly, the simplicity of living out of his backpack didn't seem that simple anymore. The money pouch under his shirt containing his cash and passport began to burn like fire under his skin and his brain spun wondering what to do.

Should he give them money, buy them food, or ignore them and keep going? Dangling beside him was a plastic bag full of half-squashed bananas and peels destined for the garbage bin. In his helplessness, he let go of the bag.

In complete disbelief, he stood watching dozens of children fighting over half-rotten bananas. One child got a hold of a black spotted peel, stuffed it in his mouth and made a barefooted dash for it with three others chasing him, tugging at his shirt.

Stunned and saddened by the image in front of him, Daniel knew, in that defining moment, that he could do much better than throwing banana peels at hungry children. He knew his life was forever changed as he silently vowed to help change theirs.

Over two decades later, Burgi pedaled his bicycle for six days over 600km at chest-compressing high-altitude for a total elevation gain of 7,900m. He cycled over two of the highest mountain passes in the world - Khardung La Pass and Chang La Pass. He wasn't riding to check off an item on his bucket list. He's not even an avid cyclist. He did it to raise money for children's education in Nepal and India

## From the Embers

Returning home from that first impressionable backpacking trip, Daniel disappeared into his work as an engineer. Still, he couldn't get the image of the Nepalese children out of his mind. At the time, he had enormous responsibilities managing a team of engineers. "My job was very demanding, and I loved it," He said, "but whenever I looked at my computer screen, I would see banana peels."

He couldn't fathom his incredibly privileged life, his formal education, job opportunities, health insurance, and access to abundant food. He and Karina "went through a deep crisis together and decided [they] needed to take a huge leap of faith and try something new," Daniel said, "So, we quit our jobs, left the country, and returned to Nepal."

Daniel and Karina's first child, Christophe, was born in Nepal, where Burgi was working on

government-related surveys for hydropower in Manang. He was often away from Karina for long periods, hiking through remote communities at high altitudes without access to cell phones or the internet. When Christophe was just three years old, he suddenly fell ill, and a message was sent to Daniel to return home immediately. When he finally managed to get a hold of Karina, she informed him that their young son had tragically passed away. Still over 100km away, Daniel ran the entire way back home.

With this staggering loss and the images of the street children that still wouldn't leave his mind, Daniel and Karina decided to create programs to help rescue, protect, nurture and educate children in the Himalayas. Their non-profit organization Himalayan Life was born.

"It wasn't our plan to build an organization, but part of it is deeply connected with our son's passing."

## Himalayan Life

Daniel and Karina began their heart-centred work by opening a street kitchen in Pokhara. The drop-in activity centre is the first point of contact for street kids, some as young as five or six years old, many deeply addicted to various substances, all without a home. There, children receive a hot meal and play games. The centre's staff, many former street kids themselves, take their time to build trust and connection with these otherwise neglected and shunned children.

"You might never realise those communities exist until you are part of it," Daniel explained, fighting back tears. "The lines between them and us need to come down for successfully working together- understanding the culture of receiving and giving charity."

While the street shelter in Pokhara offers homeless kids a safe place to visit during the day, Daniel wanted to do more to address the complex needs of basic protection, nourishment, shelter, detox, counselling and education. They expanded to include the Holistic Shelter and Street-2-School homes where kids stay long-term and follow a path to recovery. There, children and youth have a safe place to live and sleep and, if willing, go to school. Vocational programs were added for older children to learn basic skills like welding, plumbing, metalworking, house wiring, and carpentry.

## Adventure for Good

An avid, though humble, adventurer, Daniel began taking groups of people trekking to Everest Basecamp and other destinations in the Annapurna Mountain range. This was a way of showcasing the natural beauty of Nepal, but also of personalizing fundraising so people could visit programs and meet the kids their donations help to support.



### Who's writing

Misti Hurst is a former professional motorcycle racer, motorcycle riding coach, freelance writer, and mom of two. She lives in Vancouver, Canada with her family and works hard to balance adventures, travel, camping, sports and riding with regular life duties. Some of her favourite adventures so far include volunteering in Guyana, an icebreaker cruise and mushing husky sled dogs with her daughter in Sweden and Finland, and motorcycling around Nepal in 2018. It was in Nepal that Misti fell in love with charity and nonprofit work. She enjoys living life in the fast lane and documents her adventures as a moto-mom and riding coach on her website, [www.mistihurst.com](http://www.mistihurst.com).



**Right:** The Altitude Ride covered the highest mountain passes in the world

Below: Himalayan Life's 'Mountain Plastics' project is cleaning up Nepal's base camps





The harsh environment in the Himalayas makes life precarious for its most vulnerable inhabitants





The altitude ride raised \$70,000 for children's education in Nepal



On one trip in particular, Daniel was standing at the foot of Mt. Everest, admiring the towering, jagged peaks, stoic, under a deep blue sky. Feeling tiny and powerless in Mother Nature's presence and enjoying the exquisite beauty, Daniel looked down at the rocks and pebbles, snow and ice and was appalled to see garbage, trash, and plastic bottles everywhere. "Let's do something about it," he said. "I'm not exactly sure what it will take to clean up Everest, but as a token of faith, I will carry out as much trash as possible." When he left, his backpack was strapped with hundreds of plastic bottles.

He then created Himalayan Life Plastics - a social enterprise based in Pokhara, committed to the sustainable transformation of people and the planet. They recycle over 60 million plastic bottles annually and generate over 4,000 tonnes of carbon offsets. The recycled plastic gets turned into material called 'Mountain Plastic', which then becomes either new bottles or activewear.

## The Flood Gates

On June 15th, 2021, cataclysmic flooding occurred in Central and Eastern Nepal, triggered by heavy rainfall and a glacial lake bursting in the mountains. Entire towns were washed away or inundated.

Students of the Yangri Academic Centre, a school built by Himalayan Life after an earthquake hit the region, were fortunate enough to be guided to higher ground by Himalayan Life staff after local program director Sonam noticed a significant change in the river shortly after 10 p.m. Two hours later, a flash flood surged down the valley on top of the already swollen river, taking out most of

the buildings in a matter of minutes and damaging the remaining infrastructure beyond repair. The premises of their beloved school were turned into a wasteland. "By midnight, there was nothing left," remembered Daniel.

Not one to ever give up in the face of adversity, Daniel mobilized quickly to work alongside the local government and coordinate the distribution of government relief items. Tents, food, clothing, blankets, and tarps were dropped off by helicopter. All of this was amidst a Covid-19 lockdown across Nepal.

## The Altitude Ride

To raise funds to rebuild the destroyed Yangri Academic Centre, Daniel planned the Altitude Ride, a cycle tour over India and Nepal's highest mountain passes which took place in September 2022. Burgi, and a team of six riders, each committing to raise a target of \$10,000, departed on their bikes from Leh, India at Himalayan Life's Ladakh Children's Home for migrant families. With cheers and support from Nepalese migrant children, they began their ride. For six days, they navigated the challenging mountain roads, extreme altitude, and thin air as they pedaled over two of the world's highest roads.

Along the way, the team encountered countless labourers on dusty mountain roads whose existence is precarious and dangerous beyond our comprehension. These workers are constantly exposed to thin air, extreme altitude, cold, vicious wind, and dust. They receive marginal pay and have no access to health care or education services for their children.

"This is incredibly hard," said Daniel via an emotional





video on day one. "The air is so thin," he said while labouring to breathe. "I'm thinking of the road workers, and I'm thinking of the kids. We can do this."

On day six, the riders, including Himalayan Life staff member Sonam who learned to ride a bicycle just before taking on one of the most daunting rides in the world, pushed through extreme exhaustion and completed the Altitude Ride. They were greeted with cheers from the Nepalese community and raised over \$70,000 towards the rebuilding of the Yangri Academic Centre.


## Graduation Day

Daniel has hiked to Everest Basecamp five times and has walked hundreds of miles through remote villages, valleys and mountain ranges in the mighty Himalayas. He's ridden his bicycle over two of the world's highest passes in incredibly challenging conditions. He speaks six languages and has developed programs impacting thousands of children, who all call him uncle, yet he doesn't consider any of these extraordinary achievements notable or unusual.

He uses his love of the outdoors and adventure, and his faithful connection with the Nepalese people to continue to press on with his mission of rescuing, protecting, nurturing and educating children in the Himalayas.

This year, 12 students are graduating, some of whom have completed their primary schooling with Himalayan Life. "I must confess, my heart nearly bursts with joy when I look at these graduates and consider the sheer contrast between the poverty from where we met them and who they are today," said Daniel.

Besides getting educated, these kids have learnt to live with hope, confidence and reconciliation. Daniel is excited to report that a building permit for the new campus on land they have purchased further up in the Yangri Valley, is secured. Excavation work has commenced, and, under the leadership of Sonam Sherpa, the construction crew is gearing up for the huge task of rebuilding the school.

To learn more about Himalayan Life please visit [www.himalayanlife.com](http://www.himalayanlife.com). 

### Above

Daniel and Himalayan Life have helped countless children get the education they deserve



