



## As fall approaches...

The summer has been good and the volunteers, even better. The leaves will be turning soon and the time of reflection begins.

And the volunteers at the *Out in the Mountains* have been the highlight for us this summer. They make the time of deadlines and crunching here at the paper all worthwhile. Volunteers come in on the last Wednesday of the month with smiles and a willingness to get your hands dirty for a couple of hours, some every single month.

So from the bottom of our hearts, please, accept our thanks and gratitude for being there with and for us all. You are the heart and soul of this very paper.

thanks!

We thank the following volunteers who, in addition to our writers' efforts, worked on last month's paper:

### DELIVERING:

Thia Artemis, Rick Bersaw, Lynn McNicol, AIDS Project of Southern Vermont, Tom Bivins, Bennett Law, Daryl & Dennis DePaul, Kathy Donna, Thom Fleury, Danny Gates, Keith Goslant, Frank Knapp, Nat Michael, Fran Moravcsik, Fred Pond, Rick Wold.

### OTHER VOLUNTEERS:

Jessi Burg, Tom McGlenn, David Lynch, Greg Weaver, Brian Cote, Tina Giagrande, & Miguel Rivera, and the lovely, sweet lady (wink).

### OFFICE MAGIC-MAKERS:

Joseph Swinyer & Robert Wolff

## HIV/AIDS

# Nepali Organizer Visits Vermont CARES

Sunil Pant Discusses Struggles in Nepal



It's been a hard time, but the community is very strong.

SUNIL PANT, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF THE BLUE DIAMOND SOCIETY

Sunil Pant and Gus Nasmith, Jr. in Rutland, August 06. PHOTO BY JOHN BROWER

BY LYNN MCNICOL

BURLINGTON - Sunil Pant, founder of Nepal's first organization to combat HIV and AIDS and support gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender citizens, visited Vermont CARES in Burlington recently on his way to the International AIDS Conference in Toronto.

Pant studied in Hong Kong and volunteered in India after a cyclone hit in 1999. Through his travels, he became interested in helping people in his own country with HIV and AIDS and also those living as sexual minorities in a country where little tolerance is shown for them. With no help from the government, Pant formed the Blue Diamond Society (BDS) in 2001. Five years and countless struggles later, the BDS now boasts a center in Kathmandu where people can find not only relative safety, but also literacy and computer training. The BDS also networks with 20 other organizations countrywide.

Someone visiting Nepal for the first time might think homophobia isn't a problem. It's common - and acceptable - to see two boys or two women holding hands in public, Pant said. But that's because the social code is so different from the one we're used to. Instead, in Nepal, it isn't considered proper for a mixed couple to express affection publicly. Homophobia, unfortunately, is widespread, and so is the stigma against those living with HIV and AIDS.

Pant explained that same-sex couples holding hands publicly is simply an example of the "homosocial" society where people of the same sex typically work or socialize together. The reality for gay men, lesbians, transgender and bisexual citizens and anyone living with HIV or AIDS is one of prejudice, lack of information and treatment, and brutality from all corners including from families and police.

In Nepal's patriarchal society, most girls are not allowed to go to school, and men who identify as transgender are treated with contempt. Many gay men, lesbians and transgender (nearly all are male-to-female) Nepalis are married, Pant said, because otherwise there is no place for them in society. Transwomen are often blackmailed and raped by police. Many lesbians who refuse to marry are murdered by their own families or forced to commit suicide, he said. People who

identify as gay, lesbian or transgender are forced to leave their homes, school and jobs. Transwomen often turn to sex work as a way to survive.

In 2005, Pant organized the support center and hospice for those living with AIDS, as other health facilities would not treat them. Testing for HIV is very limited.

Police have even raided the BDS offices and arrested staff, claiming the transgender individuals "create indecency," Pant said. In 2004, 39 members of the Blue Diamond Society were arrested by police and held for 13 days, and at least one member was beaten by police before being released. Some of those arrested were socializing at a bar or were on their way there.

Since the government will not provide funding, a lot of help arrives through international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The NGOs began speaking up against the government, Pant said. People in Nepal are brave and outspoken, coming to rallies even though "of course the police come and beat us up," Pant said.

"It's been a hard time, but the community is very strong," he added.

Little accurate information is available about HIV and AIDS, but that's slowly beginning to change, Pant said. Nepal's government has basically issued one message about AIDS, which is for men to avoid prostitutes. There was some help from the United States, but information focusing on abstinence provided little help. The BDS provides accurate information, much of it via the Internet, as people are shy about discussing sexual matters, Pant said.

As difficult as the situation is in Nepal, Gus Nasmith, Jr. of Rutland reminded people at the small gathering that similar things happened here many years ago, such as funeral directors refusing to take the bodies of those who died from AIDS.

Pant said of his visit here that Vermont is "nice, quiet, and peaceful." Nasmith and Pant planned to travel to the AIDS conference in Toronto shortly after their visit to Burlington. ▼

The Blue Diamond Society welcomes assistance both from volunteers traveling to Nepal and those offering financial assistance. To learn more, see [bds.org.np](http://bds.org.np), call Gus Nasmith, Jr. at 802-775-7561 or email [gnsmith@sover.net](mailto:gnsmith@sover.net).