

# Gretel Patch teaches technology where few tech tools have gone before

By Jerry Foster

*“Namaste everyone. Greetings from Kathmandu, Nepal. It is a lovely night here in the valley of the Himalayas.”*

That’s EdTech student Gretel Patch, introducing herself in a virtual presentation last November to the Global Education Conference, attended by educators in 130 countries.

After she and her husband Chris graduated with bachelor’s degrees, he got a job as a consular officer with the U.S. State Department. Since then, their lives have hopscotched from one exotic address to the next.

Presently, Gretel is the technology integration coordinator at Lincoln School, a PK-12 international school in Kathmandu. The school’s 300 students, including her own, hail from 59 nations and territories.

*So, let’s talk for a minute about the Access program, which is central to the work I’ve been able to do in Nepal. Perhaps you know similar students in areas that you live in.*

In addition to working on an intensive load of online graduate course work from Boise State, Patch volunteered to help in the English Access Microscholarship Program, sponsored by the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Access offers after-school English language instruction and practice to talented 14-to-16 year-olds from economically disadvantaged sectors in 85 countries.

When she met her after-school Access students in Kathmandu for the first time, the classroom didn’t have the equipment she needed, so she loaded her family iMac into the car and carried it upstairs to the classroom.



Hindu shrines decorate Kathmandu, almost as prodigiously as pigeons.

The students—these are teenagers, remember—greeted her warmly and sang enthusiastic renditions of *Oh, Susanna!* and *I'll be Working on the Railroad*. Then she showed an Animoto slide show of her family and an iMovie production of their recent Teej festival, which she would later show in remote mountain towns.

### **Oooohs and Ahhhhs**

*“They loved it. They oohed and ahhed over the screen as they watched themselves sing and dance and recite poetry. I wanted them to see, hear, and feel technology—that it is fun, powerful, engaging, and useful.*

*“I came away with high hopes and goals for them. Teaching someone about how to access available tools is empowering. For them, the internet provides knowledge about the world. It levels the playing field a little, giving someone in Nepal access to the same*



*information that anyone else in the world has. It's about opportunity, providing them with skills that will open doors and change lives. It's also about confidence, as their skills and knowledge increase, they become more confident in their ability to help others.*

*“This is big stuff.”*

Later, she received a small grant from the embassy's Regional English Language Office to take her technology demonstrations to a couple of outlying towns.

*For them, the internet provides knowledge about the world.*

*It's about opportunity, providing them with skills that will open doors and change lives.*

Kids cluster around an iPad, part of Gretel Patch's bag of tech tools—many of which Nepali children are seeing and exploring for the first time.

Of course, in Nepal, *outlying* does not mean a suburb. It means a six-hour drive—and an unforgettable drive, as it turns out.

The road to Gorkha, for example, is a “steep and windy, bumpy, dusty, narrow, cliff-hugging ordeal—beautiful (until you climb into the clouds), but really not very pleasant by any stretch of the imagination. If you don’t have a belief in the power of prayer before that trip, you certainly will afterward.”

She told conference attendees that teen-age students in Nepal have few foundational skills in technology.

*“I had before me empty slates—willing students—who were eager to learn.*

*Many of them had never sat down at a computer, checked their email, taken their own photos with a digital camera, filmed their own videos with a video camera, or swiped on an iPad.*

*“Never.*

*“None of them have a computer at home. Those*

*who use a computer at their local ‘cyber’ check Facebook and watch YouTube. They don’t think of the Internet as a powerful learning tool.*

*“Where would I even begin?”*

Gorkha’s teachers are amazing, dedicated people who give their all to their students, but most are short on tech skills. So, she met with them in a small internet café called a *cyber* and—

*Many of them had never sat down at a computer . . .*



Don’t park too close to the curb. Heavy rains in the mountain town of Gorkha require a massive run-off system.

when the sputtering internet actually ran—introduced them to web 2.0 tools, such as Wikispaces, Google Docs, and Weebly.

**She found the students’ English more limited than she anticipated,** so she talked briefly about netiquette and how the internet works, and then the magic began.

She showed them an Animoto slide show of her family.

And then a movie-trailer-like video of their Kathmandu counterparts, dancing in the recent Teej festival.

Then she brought out every device that she could find, dividing the devices into groups of students, and they loved it and caught on immediately to whatever was placed in their hands.

*“I left this experience greatly enriched but a bit troubled.*

*“Here are such great students—eager, willing, and polite—yet life’s experiences for them are hard and they have such limited opportunities for growth and education. I truly believe in using technology and its power to enhance and further educational experiences, but for these students, it just seems so unattainable, so unreachable, so far away.*

*“I have to ask myself if it will even help them. Do they really need all of the fancy tools and applications that most of us rely on? I’m torn, knowing that the answer is both a resounding YES and a cautionary no. I’m content knowing that they are learning English, receiving an education, and are empowering themselves to really make a difference in their lives. In the end, that’s what really matters. The rest will come, in its own time.*

Later, she flew to the small town of Bhairahawa near the Indian border. With a Santa-like bag of goodies, she rode a rickshaw from the airport to the school, where she explained the internet by stringing yarn all over the classroom. She knew by now that most students just wanted to experiment with technology tools and to imagine the possibilities.

*Each student greeted me personally by bringing me a small bouquet of wild flowers. These are such great kids.*

*If your teenagers need a lesson in respect, send them over.*



Notice the number of transportation options in Bhairahawa—rickshaw, motorcycle, bicycle, oxen, and walking.

And there were a lot of possibilities in that bag, including an iPad, laptop, iPhone, speakers, portable battery-operated color printer, HD projector the size of an iPhone, camera, Flip HD video camera, and the cords, memory cards, batteries, and cables to make magic happen.

Maybe, she muses, this strategy would not have worked for students who have it all, but many of these students had never held these devices before.

*What did I really want them to take away from our time together, when all is said and done?*

*My goals this time were simple: 1) I wanted to introduce them to an American (through a multimedia slideshow about me, and my son's trailer about a recent trip to India); and 2) I wanted to show them how in just a few minutes technology could help them learn about something they otherwise knew little to nothing about.*

Patch graduates in May, just a couple of months before her husband's expected transfer to Iraq. Her time in Boise State's online EdTech program has given her the skills to make a difference in the lives and hopes of Nepalese students. She and the land and people have created a surreal experience, expressed metaphorically by a teacher in Gorkha. As Patch removed tool after tool from her bag, the teacher said, "You've got the whole world in that bag."

Yes, she does.

**NOTE:** For her service to the Access program, Gretel Patch was nominated for the U.S. Secretary of State Award for Outstanding Volunteerism Abroad.

View her learning log at <http://gretelpatch.wordpress.com/tag/access/> >.

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**Farming the foothills of the Himalayas near Gorkha is still a hand-and-tool endeavor, as it has always been. This picture was taken from the school.**

## Q&A

### Share your personal backstory.

I met my *husband-extraordinaire* Christopher in our seventh grade Utah history class in St. George, Utah, and we've been best friends ever since.

I graduated from Brigham Young University and Chris from the University of Utah. We both served LDS Church missions, and after Chris joined the State Department as a foreign service officer, we have lived in Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa; Sydney, Australia; and now in Nepal, where Chris is deputy consular chief at the embassy in Kathmandu.

### What's next?

We'll leave Nepal this summer and will be posted in Washington, D.C., for a year while Chris learns Kurdish for his next assignment in Erbil, Iraq. Because of tensions in the region, the children and I will not be **able to accompany him, so we'll likely spend time** near grandparents in Utah and Arizona.

### Tell me about the kids.

All have geographically-inspired names: Ravi, 10; Bronte, 8; Yared, 6, who was adopted from Ethiopia when we were stationed at nearby Djibouti; and Adelaide, 3. The kids attend the international school where I work. While it is not under-privileged, it is certainly diverse. It is a wonderful, nurturing, accepting environment, and – as is usually the case in small overseas communities – the school family is our family.

### What's it like to live a nomadic life?

Moving every few years is certainly an interesting dynamic. Without a doubt it brings us closer as a family. We are a tight group. The kids would rather play with each other than with friends any day. What I love most about them is that they feel at home wherever they are. Part of that is due to Chris's and my effort

to make our home a solid foundation for them, a safe and constant place, even in a world of change and chaos.

But part of that is that they develop confidence and know that they made friends before, they loved before, they will make new friends again, and they will love again.

It's not without its challenges, but

when I stop to glance through their passports or look at our 66,000+ photos taken in recent years, I know it's all worth it. They know the world is bigger than them. They have seen poverty and experienced the joy that comes from helping someone in real need. They have friends all over the world, from every faith, from many backgrounds. Watching the Olympic opening ceremonies was like watching a parade of friends. I love that.

Whatever they choose to make of it all in their future lives, it will have an impact in some way on them and I hope in some small way they will want to give back.





**TOP LEFT**—Gretel and friends in Bhairahawa.

**TOP RIGHT**—Gretel in a reading activity at a Kathmandu public school on International Literacy Day.

**ABOVE**—Girls filming a class project on the outside stairwell of the school in Gorkha.

**INSET**—Nepali students dress their best for school.

**ABOVE RIGHT**—In an art-adorned classroom, Gorkha boys look to international magazines for inspiration.

**RIGHT**—After-school Access students in Bhairahawa. Nepali students attend school six days a week.