



Fr. Watrin, who has served in Nepal for 48 years, stands in front of the Watrin Family Hall at St. Xavier's College, which he helped found in 1988.

LIVING FOR GOD

Leading for Nepal

by George Kearney

Only twelve years old, Sher Bahadur Shrestha showed up at the Kanti Children's Hospital in Kathmandu, Nepal, by himself, tiny, weak, and skinny. "Stomach problems," he said, clutching his belly. He'd been sick for weeks. He couldn't eat anything. Some of the people in his village told him he would die soon if he didn't go to a hospital. They'd heard of a group in Kathmandu, the Social Action Volunteers, who offered free medical care to those in need. The villagers chipped in and bought him a bus ticket to Kathmandu.

They were right. The Social Action Volunteers, a group started by Fr. Eugene L. Watrin, SJ, were working in the Kanti Children's Hospital, where Sher Bahadur was admitted. The doctor initially thought he had tuberculosis. The volunteers provided the needed medi-

cine and all the food for the special diet prescribed by the doctor. Sher Bahadur made remarkable progress. He didn't have tuberculosis after all, just profound dysentery. In a few weeks he'd gained twelve pounds and looked like a new person. The volunteers gave him money for the bus ride back to his village. He walked out the hospital doors a healthy child.

The Social Action Volunteers are just one of the many initiatives started and supported by Fr. Watrin, whose 48 years of service to the people of Nepal continues today, now that he has returned to Nepal.

Early years

A native of Dayton, OH, Fr. Watrin, now 83, was inspired as a boy by the lives and work of missionary priests visiting St. Anthony's, his home parish in Dayton. He entered the Jesuit

FR. GENE WATRIN, SJ, CONTINUES HIS SERVICE TO THE PEOPLE OF NEPAL

novitiate at Milford, OH, in 1939, and volunteered that same year to become a missionary. In 1946, having completed graduate and undergraduate studies, he departed for India. He remembers a tearful goodbye with his family at Union Station in Chicago and a cross country train trip to San Francisco, CA. From there he and his Jesuit companions sailed to India. "In those days it was a one-way ticket. That all changed after Vatican II, but when we said goodbye we were saying goodbye forever. 'We'll see you in heaven.' That's what my mom said. I didn't think I would ever see my family again."

In November, 1952, Fr. Watrin was ordained for priestly ministry at St. Mary's College in Kurseong, India. His mother traveled to India for his ordination. He served at schools in India until 1955, when he was sent to the Kingdom of Nepal, where a group of Jesuit missionaries from Patna, led by Fr. Marshall D. Moran, SJ, had started a school, St. Xavier's Godavari, on the outskirts of the capital city, Kathmandu.

At St. Xavier's, Fr. Watrin served as vice principal and teacher. A young Jesuit endowed with athletic ability and seemingly limitless energy, Fr. Watrin was also charged with running the sports programs at St. Xavier's. He coached the boys' track and field, hockey, basketball, soccer, cricket, and tennis teams, gain-

ing national attention for his success in these endeavors, and local admiration for his love of the games.

In 1962 he took over as principal at St. Xavier's. In the next seven years he created a wrestling tournament, founded a student council, and started a school paper, *The Godavarian*. He inaugurated many competitions, a one-act play festival, the debate festival, the General Knowledge Quiz Contest, the Mental Arithmetic Contest, and many more activities.

Godavari Alumni Association

In 1969 Fr. Watrin was appointed director of the Godavari Alumni Association (GAA), then a small social club comprised of St. Xavier's graduates. Together he and Fr. Ludwig Stiller transformed the Alumni Association from what Fr. Watrin described as an "old boy's club" to one of the world's largest and most active Jesuit alumni associations.

The reason for this growth, according to Fr. Watrin, is service. "You can always have an alumni gathering," he says, "when you get

Fr. Watrin, an avid athlete, is shown on a bike in India before departing for Nepal in 1955. He continued to use a bike as his main mode of his transportation well past his 80th birthday and became known to many in Kathmandu as the "bicycle priest."



Gene's sister Helen and her late husband Bill Klohe were among the many family and friends who supported Gene and the Nepali Jesuits in prayer and generosity.



400 people together and let them talk and eat. But if you change it so the conversation has real purpose, that's when you see people really want to become involved." So Frs. Watrin and Stiller created an alumni association committed to the same ideals as the school. They even adopted the school's motto, "Live for God, Lead for Nepal," which has guided GAA and its Social Action Volunteers for more than thirty years. "We grew because we had something meaningful to do," Fr. Watrin says. "People would go build schools, dig wells, distribute food to poor mothers, distribute clothes. We went to villages every week."

Soon a former student donated land for a building, and the alumni association had a new home. While the building houses a basketball court that doubles as a ballroom for social gatherings, much of the space has been dedicated not to socializing but to social work.

Today GAA has 400 active members who distribute medicine and much needed medical care from a pair of mobile clinics that travel to far-flung Nepali villages. Volunteers have built schools and clinics. They volunteer in countless local hospitals, distribute food and clothes to the poor, endow scholarships, run women's development programs, rural micro-credit schemes, and skill development programs.

St. Xavier's College

St. Xavier's Godavari quickly established itself as one of the preeminent educational institutions in the country. Only 30-40% of the students in the government schools pass their exams each year, while 95-100% of St. Xavier's students pass. "St. Xavier's was doing a great job of preparing our students," Fr. Watrin says, "but our students

complained when they graduated from St. Xavier's and went to the local government colleges. They didn't think they were getting a suitable education. So I said let's start a college." He says it as if starting a college were as easy as lighting the grill for a barbecue.

A man known for his desire to serve, stick-to-it-iveness, and boundless energy—even at 80, he bicycled almost everywhere he went in the Kathmandu valley— Fr. Watrin quickly earned approval from his Jesuit superiors who couldn't offer him a building but did invite him to make use of the high school facilities. So in 1988 Fr. Watrin became the chairman of the board and a founding member of St. Xavier's College, Nepal's first Catholic college, which opened its doors by offering classes at night in high school buildings.

Fr. Watrin immediately sought funding for the new college. By working closely with graduates of St. Xavier's, he was able to build the first two St. Xavier's College buildings with the help of benefactors in Germany and the United States. Today St. Xavier's College operates in two state-of-the-art classroom buildings. The Watrin Family Hall, an auditorium building, is also on campus. St. Xavier's currently offers bachelor's degrees in social work, computer science, and environmental science, and hopes to soon upgrade the social work program to a masters degree. Last year, 200 of the 209 students in the college passed the exams required to graduate and the number of applications for admission was 10 times the number of open spots in the college.

In addition to his work teaching and working at various Jesuit apostolates, Fr. Watrin has also served as the national chairman for Habitat for Humanity for Nepal, and was appointed to the first bi-national Fulbright Education Committee. In 2001, Nepal's Prime Minister selected him as one of four national awardees of the annual Social Service Award in appreciation for his career and years in the field of social service, and earlier this year he was recognized by HM Crown Prince of Nepal with the Nepal Veteran Athletes Association Award for his contribution to games and sports during his 48 years of service in Nepal.

Fr. Watrin was diagnosed in Spring 2003 with pancreatic cancer. In October, after six months of treatment in the United States, he returned to Nepal. "I'm going home," Fr. Watrin said just days before his departure. Once he's home, he'll continue to serve in

whatever capacity he can. He continues to live by the motto he and Fr. Stiller adopted for GAA.

“Live for God, Lead for Nepal.”

Fr. Watrin, who received the “Tri Shakhti Patta” (Thrice Powerful Medal) from the King of Nepal soon after his return in October, hastens to point out that he couldn’t have done any of his work alone. “The benefactors are the ones who’ve made all this possible. When I get an award from the King, it recognizes the generosity and sacrifices people have made to support the poor in Nepal. I’m there to do the work, but I can’t do the work without people’s support, prayers, and sacrifices.” ■

Support the work of Gene Watrin, SJ, and all Jesuit ministries by using the enclosed envelope or contacting Eileen Fitzpatrick, director of development, at (800)-922-5327.



Fr. Watrin is shown here atop Mt. Shivapuri with a group of children from Arcoli Village who had come to a health post run by the Social Action Volunteers to receive medical care.

Fr. Watrin was ordained for priestly ministry in Kurseong, India, in 1952. His mother Ms. Marguerite Watrin, shown here dismounting an elephant, traveled from Dayton for his ordination.

(Above left)

“He’s completely dedicated to trying to improve the lives of the people in Nepal,” says Frank Jungers (right), one of the many people around the world who have helped support Fr. Watrin’s ministries, of Fr. Watrin. They met during one of Fr. Watrin’s many trips to visit the expatriate population in Saudi Arabia, where Mr. Jungers directed Aramco, the Arabian American Oil Company. In this photo, Fr. Watrin prepares to officiate at the wedding of Mr. Jungers’ son Gary.