

The Face of the Future

Ian McKeirnan's humanitarian trip to Nepal was not surprising, because he does things like that. The surprise is that he is 12 years old.

PHOTO: SUSAN MCCONNELL



ONE HUNDRED MEDICAL SUPPLY KITS FOR DISTRIBUTION FILLED THESE LARGE DUFFLE BAGS.



IAN AND HIS DAD, EDWIN MCKEIRNAN, ARRIVE TO THEIR INITIAL DESTINATION AT DURBAR SQUARE IN KATHMANDU.

Hope and optimism are not inanimate social forces that sweep a nation into a better place. They are built one good person, one good deed, one profound human intervention at a time. They have a beginning, though you never know where. They grow. Salvation always starts small. They start, maybe, with one kid, one face, one heart.

Meet Ian Edwin McKeirnan and consider carefully who he is now, and who he might become.

WE WILL TURN THE NATION'S FUTURE and our human fates over to Ian and his generation soon, and hope for the best. But he is why you have reason to be comfortable with that exchange. You should feel affirmation about the future if there are many like him.

Ian is 12 and smart. There are lots of kids like that, though they are not clones; yet there is some aspect less obvious and deeper about Ian. He seems nothing like those robotic, ego-centered, infant prodigies who might flame out in their own solar nova and never become the adults they could have been.

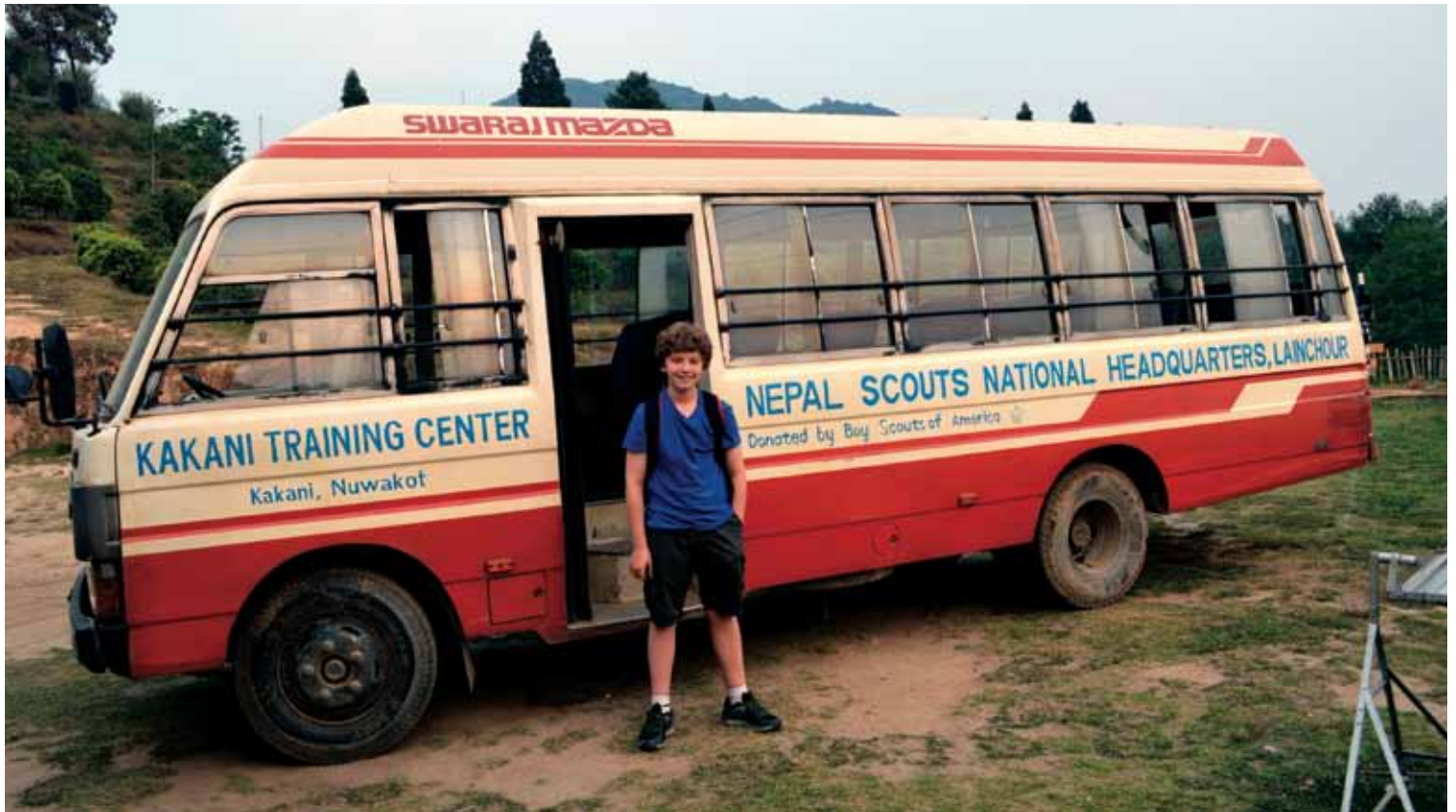
Ian is a normal kid with a dash of extraordinary, too. He is a special soul.

All of his life seems turned outward toward others. He is a charming surprise. You cannot sit with him longer than 30 seconds before he sends a subtle signal in words, or how he tilts his body, or looks squarely at you with dark brown inquisitive eyes. You are talking to a fully-formed human being who happens to live inside a 12-year-old child.

His smile is effortless and gentle. He is open, caring, thoughtful, and bright. He is the personification of hope. He already has given his world a helping hand. He probably has saved lives in a literal sense.

The art of being a significant person does not suit everyone. Ian makes life's harder choices seem imponderably easy. "Nothing really comes easily," he says. "It's what you learn that makes things seem easy. Some things look easy, but that happens because you work very hard at them. And then it just looks easy."

For Ian's September birthday, (and a couple other times a year), he and a few friends celebrate with their "Hats for Hope" charity project. They cut and sew fleece ski hats that sell for \$10 apiece, sending the cash to his chosen charity, Feed My Starving Children. Ian spends his birthday at Feed My Starving Children, where he gathers with family, friends, neighbors, and school friends for a weekend of packing vegetable and rice meals for the charity. The meals go everywhere in the world to children who are suffering without enough food. His best night was 32,000 packed meals. As experience



suggests, if you stand close to Ian, you will become drafted into his world. He will do much more. Of course, Ian is not the only face of our future, but he is likely to be one of them. He has already shown himself to be a leader of heart and spirit at 12.

“Yes, he is going somewhere,” his father says with a sometimes-puzzled amazement that grows every day. “I don’t know where. Wish I did. But he is definitely going somewhere in this life.”

Trip of a Lifetime

So Ian McKeirnan went to Nepal, the tiny landlocked Asian nation sitting in the shadow of Mount Everest. Had to go, it seems, because sometimes these ideas get in Ian, and he has to act. It was a family connection that got him thinking about it.

Nepal is an old land that was ravaged by violent earthquakes in April 2015. Nine thousand died, 22,000 were injured, entire villages were flattened, and a nation with very little in resources was traumatized. Ancient Buddhist temples tumbled. The country’s soul bled. Even now, the nation limps from human and structural wounds that might not ever heal.

It was the one place on the planet that a 12-year-old kid from Tower Lakes, in the Barrington area, would make a profound difference, not merely because he wanted to make a difference, but because he had been trained for it. He had been raised for it.

A Remarkable Journey

When Ian’s airliner touched down at the international airport in the capital

of Kathmandu in April, after flying 21 hours from Chicago, he came not as a tourist or just to observe. He—along with his dad who went only because mom demanded it—came to save lives.

They were packing 300 pounds of life-saving and emergency equipment that Ian had personally secured from volunteers and donations. They hitched a ride as equal partners with global lifesaving teams.

At that very moment, Nepal was more secure than it had been for a year, primarily because Ian and his teammates had arrived. Though the country has 27 million inhabitants, there likely were few people in the country that day with as much intensified life-saving and medical training—and if you include heart—as Ian McKeirnan.

He was a Boy Scout trained well-enough to virtually qualify as a certified American EMT or Red Cross instructor, except he’s 12 and too young to even ask. Or get a driver’s license. Certification luckily “doesn’t matter” in Nepal, he’s said.

For months, he drove his training and himself. There were wilderness first-aid regimes from the Boy Scouts Three Fires Council in St. Charles. Then came Red Cross instructors training for CPR and first aid, and hands-on training with paramedics who were Scout leaders at the Wauconda Fire District. He was being trained as an adult international first responder.

The McKeirnans traveled with a Scottish first-aid training company called Venture Medical. They learned of the company in October, when Edwin’s 99-year-old mother told him they had a distant Scottish relative named Craig Borthwick, a principal at the company.

Venture Medical was headed to Nepal to teach emergency first aid to the



LEFT: THIS BUS, USED FOR DISASTER SIMULATIONS, WAS DONATED BY THE BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA. ABOVE: IAN MCKEIRNAN TEACHES OTHERS HOW TO TIE A HANDCUFF KNOT THAT HELPS IN RESCUE SITUATIONS.



TIME WAS SPENT TRAINING ON VARIOUS RESCUE TOPICS, AS WELL AS HANDS-ON PRACTICE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM. HERE, IAN MCKEIRNAN BEGINS A TRAINING SEMINAR WITH INTRODUCTIONS.



EVERY ONE OF THE 75 DISTRICTS WITHIN NEPAL, BOTH RURAL AND URBAN, RECEIVED A MEDICAL KIT. SOME RECIPIENTS TRAVELED TWO OR MORE DAYS FOR THEIR KIT, WHICH WAS ASSEMBLED IN BARRINGTON WITH THE HELP OF THE BOY SCOUTS.

country's Scout troop leaders. If Ian was prepared, he was invited. Ian was fully prepared.

He was no tourist. He came to train the trainers—volunteers, teachers, but mostly adult Scout leaders—how to save lives. For two weeks that's what he did. "It was like going to a place that was as close to being on another planet as you could be," he says now.

Ian planned the mission by hawking money and supplies from vendors, the local Rotary, Saint Anne Catholic Church. Anyone with money in their pockets. He was a tornado.

Adventure Medical and Ever Dixie EMS sold first-aid kits wholesale to Ian, which he sold to the community to purchase medical equipment. AED Professionals in Palatine sold him a \$1,600 heart defibrillator for \$450. It's one of only seven such devices in Nepal.

From the very first hours in the 900,000-resident capital of Kathmandu, Edwin spent every day standing aside and watching Ian train adults. But Ian was on his own as a mentor. This itself is a rarity in an ancient Asian culture that expects children to act as children and not as teachers. Ian was the only Boy Scout on the mission. The Nepalese children nearby stood in the distance playing and watching while Ian did his work.

A Student Teacher

But his students leaned in and listened intently to Ian's detailed classes. He always won them over, as he almost always does with adults. Then they would load up equipment, board a Jeep, and rocket up mountain-roads-to-the-sky for their next stop. Paved roads are not an advancement that Nepal has fully embraced.

One false flick of the steering wheel would produce an immediate 1,000 plummet to the ravines below. "There were times driving when it was like watching your life flash in front of your eyes," Ian says.

He trained surviving Scout leaders who had pulled their relatives from rubble. He trained them how to close open chest wounds; how to pull a survivor up a mountain side with ropes; how to avoid death when the earth opens up. They might have to use those skills again. Nepal is a land of eternal quakes and aftershocks.

That is Ian McKeirnan's legacy in Nepal. "I think I helped there," he says now after reflecting for a moment. "There were many wonderful people there, and I was sad to leave. There were a lot of people in bad situations, but you could also see they were just as happy as anyone. That didn't have anything to do with money."



IAN MCKEIRNAN TRAINS SCOUT LEADERS ON HOW TO APPROACH A MOTORCYCLE ACCIDENT. HE INSTRUCTS ON HOW TO REMOVE A RIDER'S HELMET WITHOUT CAUSING FURTHER INJURY. MOTORCYCLE ACCIDENTS ARE COMMON IN NEPAL. BOTTOM RIGHT: HERE, TRAINEES ARE LEARNING THE PROPER APPLICATION OF A TOURNIQUET.



And what does he believe the Nepalese thought of him? “I hope they were glad I came, and that I did a good job,” he says. “I think I did.”

Doing Something Big

Ian McKeirnan is a sixth-grader in Barrington middle school and the only child of Edwin and Angela. Dad’s a project manager who implemented the new unemployment system for the entire state of Illinois. She’s a director for U.S. Cellular. He chose to become a stay-at-home dad several years ago because his career’s flexibility allowed it. Mostly he wanted to be closer to Ian’s path to wherever he is going.

Grandma Mary McKeirnan, who is 99, lives with them. She appears to be in charge. “She does all the laundry, and we can’t make her stop,” say the McKeirnan men in unison.

“Good genes,” says dad.

Mom and dad McKeirnan say they have not only tried to value Ian’s intelligence, but want to support his other skills, too. His humanness. “We believe in justice and integrity,” Edwin said. “He has a great heart,” dad says. But Ian’s life remains a constant surprise even to those who know him best.

When mom’s fancy espresso coffeemaker broke at work, she brought it home to him to either fix or use for spare parts. He’s sort of an intuitive tinkerer, just as he is an intuitive humanitarian. He found the broken component, designed a 3-D printer replacement copy of the part, made the plastic piece, and installed it. The part perked perfectly. He returned the working espresso-maker to mom.

Surprised expressions seem to be a common facet of life in the McKeirnan home.

Ian’s a straight “A” student (he worked hard to make up for the Nepal time he missed in school). He fences competitively and trains with a massive

6-foot-6 fencing instructor who attacks him voraciously. He wrestles for his school, earned a 1st degree Black Belt in Tae-Kwon-Do, and plays the viola in orchestra.


He attended kindergarten-through-third grade in an “English as a Second Language” class so he could immerse himself in Spanish with kids who spoke Español as a first language. Really wanted to learn Spanish, he says. Now it’s Mandarin. And then he also mows the yard for the first time. “I get \$20 if I do it good with the weed whacker. Twenty dollars!”

His teacher suggests Ian always seeks out those who need him. Young children. The elderly. Adults. Peers. Everyone. He fits with them seamlessly. Ian McKeirnan senses that adults in his sphere view him differently than they do other children. Well, what can you do, he seems to shrug. They are curious. They are waiting. What will he become? What will he achieve?

Upon “graduation” from fifth grade, his teacher used the school yearbook to proclaim him “student most likely to change the world.” No pressure there, right? But Ian McKeirnan had thought of this himself. He has thought deliberately about a life of “doing something big.”

“Of course by the time you are 40, you want to have a home, a family, and be happy. But I have thought of doing something big. Like inventing Facebook or being like Craig (his globe-leaping, life-rescuing Scot relative).”

And then he muses. What if, he says, it’s like you said. What if, he wonders, it takes a million people to save the world? “Maybe,” he suggests, “I would be the person who built the thing that trained the million who trained the next five million.” That is an astounding, logical moment.

We cannot foretell who and what Ian McKeirnan might become, and perhaps should not try. He is a bright mystery. The future belongs to him. But he has sent signals, and salvation always starts small. His is clearly the face of the future. 

TAKING PHOTOS IS AN IMPORTANT CULTURAL EVENT IN NEPAL. HERE IS ONE OF THE FOUR TRAINING TEAMS AT THE INTERNATIONAL KAKANI TRAINING CENTER THAT GATHERED FOR A PHOTO.

