

Snapshot: Menlo Park couple bridge ravines and worlds in Nepal

By JENNIFER DESAI

When Haydi and David Sowerwine traded their Menlo Park digs for a life in Nepal some eight years ago, they weren't expecting to start a bridge-building company. But their daring, transcontinental move has made them experts on all sorts of bridges -- and not just the physical kind.

They left Menlo Park, they say, to see the world outside Silicon Valley, and to offer their technical know-how to a country that seemed at the time to need all the Western-style help it could get. But they quickly learned there's a gulf between developed and developing nations, and it runs deeper than aquifers or asphalt roads.

"We were a little naive to think we could just jump in and tackle everything: The politics of the area, the corruption, the cultural differences," Mr. Sowerwine admits.

But for the past eight years, they've been intent on trying to bridge that gap. After an experimental, two-year stint, they decided to stay on in Nepal and -- instead of trying to finagle grants or sponsorship from outside -- to work within the country's brand-new, emerging infrastructure.

In fact, they decided to help provide the infrastructure. The Sowerwines, who support themselves primarily by renting out the two homes in Menlo Park they still own, have their own company, EcoSystems Private Limited. And like many of their Silicon Valley counterparts, they work out of their home.

Of course, when home is in Lalitpur, Nepal, the experience is a little more exotic than a Menlo Park garage or home office. Their house is equipped with a cook, Kashe, and a "didi," or housekeeper, Bishnu. It's also equipped with computers, e-mail and e-fax lines that keep them connected to their children and friends back in the States.

But it's other bridges that keep the Sowerwines busy these days. They've developed two versions of a cable bridgework system that, when strung across the ravines crisscrossing mountainous Nepal, make transit and transport possible as never before.

"The second bridge we built was across a river with steep banks and rapids," Haydi Sowerwine says. "At the dedication ceremony, we had a moment of silence to honor all the people who'd lost their lives trying to cross in that place." Nepali girls are rarely taught to swim, and "several

times a year" heavy-laden villagers trying to cross would simply disappear and be presumed dead, she says.

Slowly, village councils are starting to approach the Sowerwines for bridges of their own. The bridges -- which cost about \$7,000, half of which must be paid by the village and half by matching funds from embassies, service agencies, or other groups -- are modeled after an old Dole banana cableway transport from David Sowerwines days at the Salinas company.

The Sowerwines are also, through a network of four children's homes for orphans and kids whose parents can't afford to look after them, trying to build a less tangible bridge -- to a future generation of nation-builders.

And then there's the Forum of International Investors, a 24-person economic advisory group, and a women's collective they're working with to establish regular garbage collection, a novelty in Nepal.

With all this work, they miss their old lives and old comforts sometimes, the Sowerwines say, but they like being part of the process of building, of bridging worlds.

"You don't have to move to Nepal to change your life," Mrs. Sowerwine says. "Separation from family and friends is the price we pay for this adventure -- but e-mail and e-fax have brought us together, despite the distance."

Whatever the distance -- whether it's the 80-meter span of a new bridge in Nepal, the length of a village getting its garbage collected, or half a world crossed, via E-Mail -- the Sowerwines are right there, bridging the gap.

That role suits them, they say. "We're all interconnected in this world," Mr. Sowerwine says. "We should realize that."

Jennifer Desai writes for the Almanac.