

NEW ZEALANDERS SHINE A LIGHT ON LEPROSY

New Zealanders have been working with those affected by leprosy for more than a century. Although leprosy can be cured – a cure was found in 1982 – someone in the world is still diagnosed with the disease every two minutes.

The Leprosy Mission New Zealand's Community Active Participation (CAP) is in the third year of the project's five year duration. This year's Leprosy Awareness Week appeal is "Shine a light on Leprosy" which goes out nationwide from January 23, with the aim of raising funds so that the CAP project can continue as proposed.

'Stigma due to misunderstanding is so intense that people who notice the symptoms of leprosy often hide from their community rather than seek the help and cure that they desperately need,' says Executive Director David Hall. 'The primary goal of this project is to enable people affected by leprosy, physically disabled and marginalized, to significantly empower themselves, bringing them back into mainstream society'.

Through the help of generous New Zealanders this organization has been able to run projects ranging from diagnosis, care and cure to the present-day focus which is awareness and the right of all humans to live a life of dignity.

Here in New Zealand supporters are being asked to 'shine a light on leprosy' each with the help of a candle handcrafted by a Nepal candle-making group led by Bidiya Maharjan, who was diagnosed with leprosy at 11, and was cured. Now she and several other members of the group run a successful candle-making business, trading with the local market and generating income for themselves, family and community.

Self-help groups such as this are an important component of the CAP project and people affected by leprosy are holding key roles in the formation of groups within the community, increasing their social status and aiding integration.

'The Shine a Light on Leprosy campaign will signify the improving situation for leprosy affected communities', says Mr. Hall, 'and in particular marginalized women through sharing Ms Bidiya's story. The CAP project is enabling change and lives are being transformed free from stigma and social exclusion'.

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