

## In the Spotlight



# Taking steppes forward with *The Bears*

*The Bears* have left paw prints all around the world, from Nepal to Budapest, Finland to Japan. Now, social worker and international aid volunteer Kate Miller has been championing our ursine friends in Mongolia. Our special thanks to Kate for sharing her story and beautiful photos.



Mongolia is a land of perpetual blue sky, hills, steppes and desert. In the north, where I've been living, we have temperatures as high as 25°C with lows of -40°C. It is the most diverse climate I have ever lived in—and as someone coming from Australia, that's saying something!

It is also a country that is very proud of its cultural heritage. Chinggis Khan (better known to Westerners as Genghis Khan) has his face on every kind of item, from toilet paper to vodka. But cultural pride can sometimes be a downfall. A large proportion of the older, adult population doesn't speak or read English at any level, which limits their ability to access resources, especially resources that can help them in developing their professional practice.

I started my current assignment in Darkhan, a small city in the north of Mongolia, in August 2014. My role involved running a series of workshops on mental health with local school social workers. Back in Australia, I'd developed a program to educate parents with mental health issues, so my colleagues in Darkhan asked if I could facilitate

some training based on that program for local professionals working with children and young people. Thus, the 'Changing the Tune on Mental Health' program was born!

As part of the program, we ran a pilot project with a group of about 20-25 school students, most of them aged 13-15 years old. We had a mixed group—more girls than boys—and the goal of the 4-session program was to help the students develop a more positive understanding of mental health. We wanted to inspire them to try to raise awareness and make changes within their community, and even to develop their own community awareness program.

In Mongolia there is a lot of pressure on young people to make decisions about their futures early on. In one session we discussed stressors for teenagers which triggered lots of discussion, causing me to realise just how much pressure they're under at this stage of development. For young men and women there are also vastly different gender expectations, which can increase the level of stress they experience. Male children are often pushed into more physically demanding jobs, while female children are encouraged to study hard and go to university. In fact, when we ran the pilot, some of the students had to skip sessions because it was exam time.

Fortunately, at the last minute I'd chosen to bring *The Bears* with me to Mongolia, and I found the cards to be fantastic in encouraging the students to explore their emotions at the start of each session. With Mongolia's rapidly changing economic environment, there's a lot of pressure for young people to make decisions based on their capacity to bring home cash, rather than choosing a career based on work they enjoy. The cards also helped me to understand which students were not in particularly positive frames of mind.

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*The Bears* and I first met when I was still a student at the University of Queensland. In 2007, during my first social work placement, I attended training on suicide and self-harm. I saw *The Bears* and knew I'd use them over and over again in my practice. The money was worth it, even on my student budget! I've since used them for child protection work in Australia, in Nepal with children of prisoners and now in Mongolia. Here, I've also used them in workshops with adults, meetings with colleagues and interviews with children who have witnessed domestic violence. They've proven helpful in crossing linguistic boundaries with people of all ages!

Following the success of the pilot program in Darkhan, and with the help of the senior school social workers here, we've since taken the Changing the Tune on Mental Health program to the governor of the local aimag (province). It's been agreed that this program will be included as part of a new life-skills curriculum for high school students. My counterpart, Byambaa, took down the English version that I'd developed, and has translated it into Mongolian. Eventually, once the entire program is ready to print, it will be distributed to school social workers around the town.

While a lot of volunteers who travel to Mongolia are placed in the capital city and have a very different experience to mine, living in the countryside has been the most delightful part of my assignment. My walk to work includes apartment buildings, a giant Buddha statue, gers (traditional, circular dwellings made of wood and felt) and horses. My trips to the black market (where I go for my basic

One of my experiences in Darkhan involved a very young child who wasn't communicating at all with local police. I brought the cards out as a way to break the ice, but they ended up completely changing the outcome of the interview. The child used *The Bears* to describe each of the people involved in the incident, and eventually became comfortable enough to speak to a female officer. The only problem we had was that the child wanted to keep the card that she'd used to describe herself, as a bit of a totem I suppose, so now we're down to 47 in the set!

necessities such as fruit and vegies) often involve traversing crowds of humans, dogs and horses—a little bit of a change from running up to the local Woolies!

Seeing as I'm returning to Australia, I'm leaving my set of *The Bears* with my colleagues. The students in the pilot group really enjoyed using the cards, so I think they'll be a useful resource for the social workers here. *The Bears* is a resource that allows those of us working in countries where language barriers exist to still connect with our fellow human beings on a deeper level, allowing social work to actually work. For international aid work, the card set is small enough that you can carry them with you—and they don't cost you anything in excess baggage!



## In the Mailbag

Nada Stadtlander works as a life coach with children, young people and adults in Auckland, New Zealand. Recently she's been using *The Bears* with a group of 7-year-olds to explore feelings. Here's her activity:



To begin with, I space all the cards out on a table so they are ready when the children come in. They are encouraged to pick a card to illustrate how they could be feeling today. I pick one too. We then sit in a circle with our bears facing outwards so everyone can see them. We start with one child (let's call her Sally) and I ask the group 'Who thinks they know what Sally's bear is feeling?' There are usually quite a few suggestions. Then I ask Sally 'Is that what your bear is feeling?' and let the child say yes or no. I give team

points (girls vs boys) for each feeling that the children suggest. If no one can guess after a few suggestions, I ask the child 'Would you like to tell us what your bear is feeling?'

They really love to play this game and it helps them to learn how to recognise and name different feelings. I'm looking forward to trialling more of your resources in the future!

*Nada Stadtlander, jewelswithinyou.com*