

## A friend to the Sherpas till the end

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DESPITE what he had achieved, he was always very humble and committed." These were the words of the chief administrator of the Hillary Himalayan Trust on learning about the death of the man who conquered Mount Everest in 1953.

Sir Edmund P. Hillary, together with Tenzing Norgay, a Sherpa, succeeded at a task seven previous expeditions had failed to achieve.



Sir Edmund Hillary was proud to have built schools and clinics for Sherpas than leaving his footprint on Mount Everest's peak

It was not until the death of Norgay that Hillary revealed (in his 1999 book, *View From the Summit*) that he was about three metres ahead at the final ridge, making him the first person to reach the top of the world's highest mountain at 8,850m. Such was the humility of this heroic figure.

Hillary, a New Zealander, who preferred to be addressed as Ed, passed away of heart failure in Auckland on Jan 11. He was 88.

His health suffered after a fall while visiting Nepal last April. While Ed and Norgay (who passed away in 1986), deserve the highest accolades for their bravery in scaling the world's highest peak, there is more to their historic conquest.

For Ed, in particular, his legacy stands out in terms of physical fitness and endurance. He successfully completed six trips to "the roof of the world".

Unlike many world-famous achievers who tend to be preoccupied with their new found fame and wealth, Ed was very different. For more than 50 years, he made it a point to return to Nepal more than 100 times to give back what he had gained from the local community.

He devoted his efforts to promoting Nepal and the people to whom he owed his fame.

In 1962, Ed set up his Himalayan Trust, through which many schools, hospitals, clinics, bridges and airstrips were constructed for the Nepalese.

He also helped set up reforestation programmes in the country and ensured that fresh water was readily available to the community.

Though his feat focused the world's attention on the mountain, Ed is quick to warn about the impact of callous tourism (in comparison to professional mountaineering) on the future of Nepal.

To this end, he supported the listing of Sagarmatha (Everest is known to Nepalese by this and other names like Cholumunga) National Park in the Himalayas on the World Heritage danger list.

In this way, it became legally protected by the international community. Otherwise, not only will the once lavish ice caps disappear but the Everest will fast turn into the "world's highest waste disposal point", no thanks to unscrupulous visitors. This was the concern and commitment shown by Ed.

He is on record to even decline an invitation from the Queen, on the 50th anniversary of his achievement, just so that he could travel to Kathmandu to be with his Sherpa friends.

He was fond of helping the ethnic Sherpas of the Solukhumbu region near Mount Everest. Understandably, Norgay's son called the death a great loss for humanity.

The Nepalese Minister of Tourism, Culture and Aviation regards Ed as an "undeclared ambassador". To the larger Sherpa community of Nepal, Ed is regarded as a "second father".

In 2003, he was made an honorary citizen of Nepal.

Ed once said: "My most worthwhile things have been the building of schools and clinics. That has given me more satisfaction than a footprint on a mountain."

Upon completing his autobiography, *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win*, he summed up his philosophy of life in a 1975 interview: "Adventuring can be for the ordinary person with ordinary qualities, such as I regard myself."

The chief administrator of Hillary's Himalayan Trust said: "There is no one who can fill his shoes."

Much like the Everest that he had scaled, Ed's legacy will soar even higher. More than that, he will remain a rare gem of genuine humility which will remain unsurpassed.

On Jan 22, the world will bid its last goodbye to Ed, following a state funeral in his honour in Auckland. He will be sorely missed but fondly remembered. May he rest in peace.

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