# 'In Nepal, all my problems faded away'



Working on projects and meeting people overseas

proved to be cathartic for these teenagers – as they

reveal to Laura Millar

'IT WAS LIBERATING NOT TO BE DEFINED BY WHAT HAD HAPPENED'

AFTER BRIDIE O'HARE, 19, FROM CLEETHORPES, WAS CAUGHT UP IN THE MANCHESTER ARENA BOMBING ON MAY 22 2017, A JOB WITH CAMP AMERICA IN JUNE WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE HEALING PROCESS.



The Ariana Grande concert had just finished and I was still in my seat, getting my phone out to call my mum and find out where in the car park she was, when the bomb went off. Just before the sound, it was almost like the air went still and everyone froze; then it felt like a sonic boom echoing rough the building. I knew instantly what it was, judging by everyone else's eactions, and my immediate thought was: 'It's going to happen again, I need o get out *now*.' Luckily, I wasn't far from an exit, but it was mass panic;

was in fight or flight mode. I don't remember much else before etting to the car park; I know some people saw flames, and of course some saw horrific sights they'll never forget. Although I made it out safely, it was with the overwhelming sense that if d been sitting somewhere else, I might never have made it. I didn't see myself as lucky - more like guilty that d survived, when many others didn't Afterwards, I went from being a normal, happy, outgoing person to

being very withdrawn, and wary. I was scared of going out - what if it appened again? Eventually I started seeing a counsellor, and tried to get back to normal. I even took up my place at Leeds University that September, but I just ouldn't deal with it. I found t hard being in an unfamiliar etting, surrounded by people I didn't know, so I moved back home in January [2018]. There I felt safer, but [the attack] was still in the news; I felt I couldn't get away from it. I

was having nightmares and

lways thinking about what

had happened.

Camp America, spending a summer working at a camp with young people. My mum agreed that a change of scene | matter - out here, I could be who I would be a good idea. I hoped that by getting some distance, I would be able

to be myself again.
In June I headed to the Skylark
Ranch, a girl scout camp in Pescadero, California, just north of Santa Cruz. I at the all-girls school I attended had no idea what would be expected of around Year 9. I wouldn't call it me, but my role was to help run

My responsibilities varied from overseeing horse-riding to a really fun survival course based on the US TV show Gilligan's Island. We had to show | because some of the girls thought they the kids how to make beds out of sticks looked unfashionable, they shared and twine, and cook meals on a campfire. I'd never pictured myself doing anything like that, but it was great fun. At the end of that activity, we did a 'mud hike', where we all slid down a mudslide into a giant pit of, well, mud! It's the sort of thing I would never normally do, but it helped me feel like a kid again and forget all my worries. Having some responsibility, and helping make a change in young people's lives that hopefully they'll

remember forever, was a great feeling.

I made really good friends at camp,

and after it was over a few of us went on a road trip to New York. I rarely thought about what had happened and it was liberating not to be defined people were pushing and shoving, kids | by it. It did randomly come up in nd adults were screaming - everyone conversation once, but by then I really trusted the people around me so I felt comfortable talking about it. I was sad to come home, but now I really feel I can move on with life and hopefully go back to uni next year." **■ Further information:** campamerica.co.uk

## **'OUT THERE, I COULD** BE MYSELF'

**ALEX SMITH\*, 19, FROM** COVENTRY, FOUND THAT A TRIP TO NEPAL WHEN SHE WAS 16 HELPED PUT HER PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL INTO PERSPECTIVE.

At the top of the steep steps leading to a viewpoint that overlooks a vast valley in the Annapurna Foothills of Nepal, I burst into tears. As part of my volunteering trip with Global Vision International, we were lucky enough to travel around the country - and this trek took us down the valley, then up these steps, the stairs to Ghandruk. As I looked across at the seemingly an incredible sense of achievement, coupled with a feeling of being utterly tiny and insignificant. It gave me a real sense of perspective; suddenly all the problems I'd experienced back home faded into insignificance.

The girls at my school who made me feel bad about myself just didn't was, and everyone I'd met so far had responded to me on that level. It was a highly emotional experience, and it

has stayed with me ever since.

Things started to get difficult for me outright bullying, but something activity programmes for the girls, who ranged from around seven to 17.

outright bullying, but something harder to put your finger on. I'd describe myself as an individual. describe myself as an individual, not like everyone else, but that can make you a target. Once, I came in wearing a pair of shoes I'd saved up for, but pictures of them on Instagram, saying

how horrible they were. I was also



years - and I became more and more shunned and isolated. No one wanted to sit with me at lunchtime, or pick me for gym teams; there was nothing outright nasty, but it was enough to make me miserable and vulnerable. I became withdrawn, and gave up on making friends, throwing myself into my studies. My parents didn't notice how unhappy I was; they saw my good grades and thought I must be OK. By the time I was 15, things were ba

enough for my parents to start hinking about me changing schools. I just wanted to get away from everything and began researching how I could. I found GVI, the only organisation that offered a voluntee programme for people my age, and applied. I chose Nepal because it sounded fascinating. I'd only ever been on family holidays to Spain, and, once to Sri Lanka but I'd never done endless landscape we'd traversed, I felt | anything truly adventurous. So the next summer I flew off to Kathmandu more excited than nervous. It felt instantly overwhelming: the noise, the chaos, the dirt roads... but

also absorbing. The volunteer work

'At the top of steps leading to a view over a valley near Annapurna, I burst into tears'

dormitories of a school in a tiny village in the middle of rice fields. Seeing where these children lived, it felt so different to my own life – but it was amazing. It showed that I could make difference to others; as a teenager, you don't feel like you have much power or agency to make things happen, but his proved that, actually, you do. I felt blissfully disconnected from shelter for women who had been sold everything during the two weeks I was

there; there was very little Wi-Fi, so it felt like a release from the pressure of social media, which I do think can also be damaging to mental health. A lot of | Camp in Nepal, the girls at my first school had the attitude 'If it's not on Instagram, did it even happen?' rather than just enjoying a moment for what it was. I loved connecting with people who were different from me. We visited a

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Annapurna Base main: Bridie O'Hare in California, far left; Alex Smith in Nepal, left; and

into sex slavery and escaped, but had then been rejected by their families. I'd shaved my head for charity and all these women had shaved heads, too - their hair had been removed when they'd been sold. It was a powerful moment of connection, but

or very different reasons. When I got back, I started at a new school, which felt like a clean slate. I made new friends there, and had much more confidence to be myself. It elt as if I had matured so much in a

ery short space of time. These days, I don't get stressed bout small things and I also feel ncredibly lucky to have so much when so many people have so little. Next year I plan to go to college, but I would definitely do this again - and l commend it to anyone." ☐ Further information: gvi.co.uk Name has been changed

### LOOKING OUT AT TH VIEW MADE ME FEEL LIKE I DIDN'T HAVE A CARE IN THE WORLD

**JONATHAN BERRY, 19, FROM** LIVERPOOL, STRUGGLED WITH DEPRESSION IN THE **AFTERMATH OF HIS PARENTS' DIVORCE, BUT WORKING WITH ELEPHANTS IN CHIANG MAI** HELPED HIM FEEL HAPPIER

ist after I got back from volunteering n Thailand this summer, I met up with my friend Joanne and she said she'd never seen me look so happy. It's ertainly true that when I was out there I hadn't felt that good about myself in a very long time.

When I was 14, my parents went hrough a bad divorce. My brother, ister and I were caught in the middle, and as a result I don't have a elationship with my mum any more. I

thought I was dealing with it all OK, but | you can be stressful." over the next few years I became more and more depressed. I had no idea what │◆For information and wanted to do after my A-levels and felt eally unfulfilled and directionless. I otated between different jobs and apprenticeships, so I wasn't left on my wn to sit and think. I tried to explain now I felt to Joanne, but didn't feel I ould open up to others.

While I was at school, we'd gone on a group trip to Peru when I was 15, elping out on a project there. I'd really enjoyed it, and liked knowing that I was contributing to a good cause. Earlier this year, the school where I'm doing teacher-training offered to extend my contract ful time, so I took the opportunity to find another volunteering project before I started again this September. I chose one via GVI, in Chiang Mai, which



### **HOW TRAVEL CAN HELP IMPROVE** MENTAL HEALTH

Tom Madders is campaigns irector at YoungMinds, which supports parents who are concerned about the mental health of their children. He says: "Taking time out of your normal routine, trying new things and setting yourself new challenges can help you get perspective on how you are feeling and how to take

care of yourself. "Being exposed to other ways of life can also build empathy towards others. But know your boundaries Finding yourself in an without your normal support network around

advice about looking after yourself, see youngminds. org.uk/find-help

◆For general information about Young Minds, see youngminds.org.uk.

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offered the chance to work with elephants, an animal I love, on a conservation programme. I'd never been away on my own before, so it was scary, but I soon felt like part of the group. I was there for four weeks, but you can stay just one week, so new people were coming and going all the time. My job was to help

collect data on eight elephants near Huay Pakoot, where we were based. Every day we'd hike out into the rainforest to find them, which could take hours, but there was a lot of camaraderie and bonding between the volunteers and the Thai staff. What really struck me, too, was that I never saw anyone local who didn't have a smile on their face. The villagers would be working hard every day, farming, and yet they still found life good. It made me realise we don't have a leg to stand on back home, as far as complaining goes - yet so many of us are miserable. These people were

satisfied with very little I got into a routine every morning of going to a little café run by one of the villagers. I'd get there just as the sun rose and have my coffee lying in a nammock on his deck, overlooking a valley. It was my bit of me-time every day, and I'd look at the view and feel like I didn't have a care in the world Making friends helped. Several volunteers based in the UK have come to Liverpool to visit, and I'm off to

Northern Ireland soon to meet up with another guy. The experience helped clear mv head and made me realise 1 don't have it that bad - so I'm going back to Thailand after Christmas. I think mental health issues should be discussed more openly at school, so young people know where they can go for help. I'm currently liaising with government authorities to try to get people to come and talk to the kids at

ny school. I now feel 100 per cent

☐ Further information: gvi.co.uk.

Going away has had a profound effect

happier, and a lot more stable.

on who I am, and how I feel."

# **Escape to Malta's** sunshine city

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elegance of this capital, boutique hotels set designed by the Knights in grand houses and of St John as a "city restaurants serving up built by gentlemen for the island's distinctive gentlemen", following Mediterranean cuisine and you have all the the Great Siege of 1565. Today, most visitors ingredients for a arrive by plane – Malta delightful weekend breal

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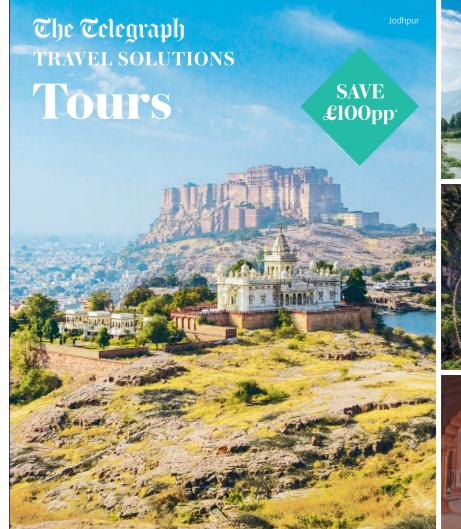
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