

# NANAIMO NEWS BULLETIN

## Nanaimo couple wins governor general's award for international charity work

Jessica Durling

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*Adrienne Dartnall and Rick Lennert formed Kids International Development Society in honour of their daughter Danielle. Last month the couple received the Meritorious Service Award from the governor general at a ceremony in Ottawa. (Jessica R. Durling/News Bulletin)*

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A Nanaimo couple has received the prestigious Meritorious Service Medal, presented by Canada's governor general, for their charity work as founders of the Kids International Development Society.

Adrienne Dartnall and Rick Lennert were in Ottawa last month to receive the award, which according to the [governor general's website](#) serves to recognize "remarkable contributions in many different fields of endeavour, from advocacy initiatives and health-care services, to research and humanitarian efforts."

"I think we actually teared up, it was very moving, and of course for our daughter too," Dartnall said. "We've done it in her honour. All the work we have done, she was with us."

What was a tremendous moment for the Nanaimo couple was only reached because of a tragedy 24 years ago.

In 2000, Dartnall and Lennert's lives were shattered when their 21-year-old daughter Danielle was hit and killed by a drunk driver, just blocks away from their home in Nanaimo.

To heal and find a path forward, Lennert, a self-employed builder, and Dartnall, a social worker, took a leave from work and began to travel around the world. First England, next Ireland, then Germany to stay with some of their friends.

"I called it walking with grief. We just started walking with grief," Dartnall said.

While in Germany, friends recommended they reach out to a contact of theirs in Kerala, India. They followed through, and soon found themselves on the ground in India, visiting local sights. One of these was Friends and Birds of the Air, a religious organization which helps families experiencing homelessness. Seeing the barren walls of the organization's daycare, the two offered to paint the building out of their own pocket.

With their brushes dipped in bright colours, planes began to form on the once-empty concrete, and familiar characters and rainbows, as children gathered around. For the first time since their trip started, the pair felt healing.

"When we saw how everybody lived, it kind of made us realize, 'we've got to go on and maybe help other people,'" Dartnall said.

The two returned to Nanaimo after six weeks, but when the next year rolled around they travelled to Cambodia. Taking out their paint, this time a school was the canvas. They painted the walls solid colours, adding bamboo embellishments.

The next year, they travelled to a refugee camp on Myanmar's border for similar volunteer work.

Community members began to donate to the couple's activities, and over the years, it stopped being paints and brushes, but water filtration and schools, working with local contractors. The couple formed a registered charity under the name Kids International Development Society, with a minimum of 95 per cent of donations directly helping children and their families.

As of 2024, Lennert and Dartnall have participated in 32 clean drinking water projects in schools, supplied 250-300 school computers, funded the building of two floating schools and a floating clinic, supported a home for at-risk and vulnerable girls and a pre-school/kindergarten meal program, and more.

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One trip that stuck out to them was in 2013, when they visited a primary school in Kauk Chrey, Cambodia.

"We went outside and the kids were playing but there was no energy..." Dartnall said. "We talked to [a local guide] about it, and he said they're dehydrated. They have diarrhea and they get sick a lot. Sometimes they come to school, [sometimes they don't]."

Seeing the need for hydration, the Kauk Chrey school would become the couple's first clean water project. Forming an agreement that they would pay for the build if the school maintained the upkeep, the pair partnered with the Compassionate Eye Foundation in Vancouver, hired local workers, and built a concrete solar-powered well with a filtration system imported from Thailand.

When they came back the following year to visit, the children were laughing.

The two continue their work to this day. Their next trip is scheduled for November where they'll be gone for four months, travelling to Siem Reap, Cambodia, and heading north.

"We're pretty well working in the same area now, we work in different villages in rural areas around different provinces," Dartnall said. "If we hear about something or one of the people we work with says 'I went to this clinic ... and they don't have any water' ... if we hear those stories then we go there."

Sanitation and water shouldn't be taken for granted, Lennert said, and he urges people to think about both "here and there" when they donate and volunteer.

"Let's not forgot those children are starving and don't have anything in the other parts of the world."

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