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Wiring an ancient culture



Courtesy Rick Schneider

Dan Haig, third from left, put together a high-tech team that went to India to help Tibet's government in exile set up its own intranet. The other team members were, from left to right, Rick Schneider, Jack Burris, Stefan Lisowski and Ari Salomon.

BY CAROLYN JUNG

Mercury News Staff Writer

AT A REMOTE spot in the Indian Himalayas where terraced fields of wheat hug hillsides, wild monkeys roam streets and wicked hailstorms sever power and phone lines, five self-described computer "geeks" and Webmasters have helped bring modern technology to an ancient culture struggling to survive.

Donating their time and money, these high-tech experts -- most from the Bay Area -- traveled 40 hours and carried 165 pounds of steel cable and hardware in backpacks to help install a computer network for the Dalai Lama's government in exile.

Because of their efforts, the Dalai Lama and his cultural and governmental officials, who fled Tibet after China's invasion, now have an intranet e-mail system to communicate faster and more efficiently throughout their adopted home base of Dharamsala, India.

More important, when an English-Tibetan Website and Web connection eventually are established in Dharamsala, Tibetan monks and nuns can tell the world not only about the rich history of Tibetan Buddhist culture, but also the persecution suffered at the hands of the

Chinese.

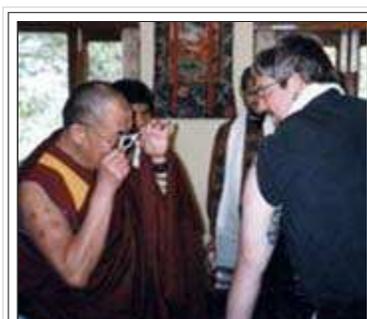
“These people are not computer illiterate. They are skilled but they just don't have the access to our expertise over there,” said Rick “Mister 3D” Schneider, 36, of San Francisco, an Internet telecommunication systems engineer, who was part of the expedition. “Until China rolled in, they were living 2,000 years in the past in a nomadic life,” he said. “The fact that we could go over there and provide them this service was great.”

Schneider left for India on April 3 with Dan Haig, 33, a Web architect in San Francisco; Stefan Lisowski, 27, a San Francisco Webmaster; Ari Salomon, 25, a San Francisco graphic artist; and Jack Burris, 28, a University of Wisconsin computer center employee.

Four of them returned home May 8. But Haig, who organized the expedition, decided to stay at least until September to teach the exiled Tibetans how to use the new systems and to help keep the network functioning.

While in Dharamsala, group members met with the Dalai Lama, who peppered them with questions about computers and laughed in amusement at some of the group's attire, including Schneider's tattoos.

(Some members plan to see the spiritual leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner again when he visits the Bay Area next week. One of the Dalai Lama's appearances will be at a Monday appearance at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium in San Francisco.)



Courtesy Rick Schneider

The Dalai Lama looks through 3-D glasses to get a better view of Rick Schneider's 3D tattoo.

Tibet's plight

Haig's four colleagues knew little about Tibet beforehand. But they listened as Haig, a former Tibetan Buddhist studies graduate student, explained how more than 6,000 monasteries and temples have been destroyed. An estimated 1.2 million Tibetans -- about a sixth of the population -- were killed or died of starvation after China invaded Tibet in 1950, according to the government in exile.

When they heard the background, they agreed to work on the TibetNet Project.

The five of them used nearly \$60,000 of their own money for plane fare and computer equipment. They took leaves of absence from their jobs. They did all that, they said, in hopes that their work for the government in exile would allow Tibetans to muster worldwide support for ousting Chinese forces.

“The word for ‘Tibet’ in Chinese, *Xizang*, means ‘western treasure house,’” Haig said in an e-mail interview from Dharamsala. “China invaded Tibet simply to pillage it, and they have done a good job of that. We mean to put an end to this by alerting the world to the consequences of turning its back on human rights and environmental preservation.”

From his desk at the Tibetan Computer Resource Center there, Haig is reminded daily of the plight of a people forced from their homeland. Since 1960, when Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru granted permission, the Dalai Lama and his government in exile have lived in Dharamsala. Throughout the area, Tibetan monks and nuns walk the streets, going to and

from ornate temples and passing walls of spinning prayer wheels.

Haig got involved in Tibet's plight after graduating from the University of Wisconsin in 1987. He went to Taiwan, where he taught English for a year, before traveling to China and then hitchhiking into northwestern Tibet.

"I felt as if I was traveling in the west of the United States as it must have been 1,000 years ago," he said. "There were nomadic tribes of Tibetans with their herds, eagles and wolves everywhere, and not a sign of 'civilization' except for the little strip of road linking the few small villages hours and hours apart."

That trip led him to enroll in a Tibetan Buddhist studies graduate program in Wisconsin. Two years ago, he went to Dharamsala to attend courses on Tibetan medicine, which was his dissertation topic. There he met the director of the Tibetan Computer Resource Center, who enlisted his help.

For years, the government in exile relied on telexes and faxes, which are costly in India and not very reliable, Haig said. Four years ago, the government in exile started an e-mail project with a grant from the Canada Tibet Committee in Montreal.

The challenge for Haig and his comrades was working on a project where electrical wires are exposed in huge tangles, piles of rubble dot streets and Tibetans work on obsolete, dusty Macintosh computers, none of which were networked and some of which only have one megabyte of RAM.



Courtesy Rick Schneider

Dan Haig looks over the hardware and cable his group brought with them to India.

Haig and friends brought Pentium motherboards and processors, drill bits to bore through concrete buildings, as well as 800 feet of steel cable and 2,400 feet of coaxial cable.

They wired the seven Ministries of the Central Tibetan Administration, and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, to give them direct, high-speed connections between offices and to the Web server. They also created an e-mail system and a dial-up service for many governmental and cultural institutions in the Dharamsala area that were too far away to be on the network.

By doing all this, they hope to give the Tibetans valuable tools in their struggle for survival.

"Tibetan Buddhist culture has fostered something that the rest of the world needs very desperately in order to make it through the next century --compassion for all living things and realistic ways to develop such compassion," Haig said. "So they give us compassion and we give them, well, a Net connection. Hopefully,

we will give them more than that in the end."

Donations for the TibetNet Project can be sent to The Committee of 100 for Tibet, a non-profit group formed in support of an independent Tibet, P.O. Box 60612, Palo Alto, Calif. 94306. For more information, e-mail Dan Haig at gizard@dsala.tibet.net or access Websites at

www.tibet.org/Tibet100 or www.tibet.org/TibetNet/

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