Steve and Chris Sloan’s excellent adventure was a father and son outing to end them all.

RETURN TO KATHMANDU

BY MICHAEL WATERS

S tephen Sloan’s cramped faculty office in OU’s Dale Hall Tower boasts traces of his good humor and his penchant for getting things done. Mementos line the walls, hinting at the high regard he has achieved for three decades of political science scholarship, pioneering studies in terrorism and consulting work for law-enforcement authorities in a myriad of states, countries and continents.

But his favorite “memento” appears to be nothing more than an ordinary-looking videotape, labeled “Steve and Chris’s Excellent Vacation.” A surface viewing shows father and son on a jolly vacation trip to faraway Kathmandu, but down deep the tape stands for much more.

For most people, “Kathmandu” conjures a well-worn image from story or song, a symbol of distant exotica. Sloan’s Kathmandu is, by contrast, a warm and human place—a locale full of friends and, moreover, adoptive kin. The intense greenery and distinctive past-mets-present bustle of this city linger in memories of the south Asian nation of Nepal—in Sloan’s heart, a second home.

A talkative, ebullient man whose accent betrays his New York City roots, Sloan pulls the video from a shelf behind his desk. “This will be a hoot,” he promises. As he rewinds the tape, he talks about each of his 1972 and 1996 visits to the ancient Hindu kingdom, and his discovery that, clichés to the contrary, you really can go home again.

“I thought, ‘My gosh, it actually does look a little like Shangri-La,’” Sloan recalls his first sighting of the ancient city, which rests in a green, rich valley laden with rice paddies. A young political science professor from the University of Oklahoma, he had come to Nepal in 1972-73 during a one-year Fulbright exchange professorship.

During that year in the “remarkable” and “utterly magnificent” environment, Sloan recalls the singular joy of meeting a wide array of students, scholars, politicians and artists.

“They were exceedingly friendly people,” Sloan explains. “In their differing ways, they spoke for a remarkable country which, though poor in physical resources, was rich in a people who grew up in the shadows of the Himalayas.”
OU professor Steve Sloan, right, and his son Chris, center, are reunited with Steve’s Nepali “brother,” Rajendra Bikram Thapa, whom he met as a young instructor at Tribhuvan University in 1972. Thapa later spent a year with the Sloans in Oklahoma.

He adds, “In a real sense Nepal was sheltered, because the airport wasn’t used much for international flights, and the place was not really on the tourist path. You didn’t have any television at that time. It was still very much a traditional monarchy, and it was the only Hindu state in the world.”

Sloan found a land where traditionally garbed sheep herders stared in awe at the novelty of a traffic light, and where beautiful Hindu temples cast shadows on a colorful collection of local peasantry, political firebrands, Western expatriates and bohemian youth.

Many of the “very friendly people” Sloan came to know were among the educated elite who studied in his classes at the political science department of Tribhuvan University. From that elite came a number of close friends—and in a couple of cases, family.

“I met my Nepali sister,” Siddhanta, a Rana princess who was an aunt of the current king,” Sloan recalls. “We hit it off, to the point where I was made her brother in a long, traditional Hindu ceremony, which I was very honored by.

“She was an incredibly special woman,” Sloan says warmly. He describes her as a feminist, hairdresser and “one-woman intelligence service” who was “completely knowledgeable about politics and the kingdom, and in her own way was very influential.”

He adds, with a broad smile, “She’d pretend to be a little befuddled—but she was always on top of things.” Sadly, she died some years ago, and Sloan wants to keep her memory alive: “I’m going to write a book about her someday.”

Another close friend was Siddhanta’s husband, one-time UN ambassador and Nepali finance minister Rishikesh Shaha, who “often saw the inside of prisons and suffered the wrath of the elite because of his constant support of democracy.”

Then, there was Sloan’s “brother,” Rajendra Bikram Thapa, a young instructor at the university who, Sloan remembers fondly, “called my home his” during the year, and later came to Oklahoma for a year, where he jokingly referred to himself as “The Man Who Came to Dinner.”

Sloan also relishes the memory of his living quarters in Kathmandu, an “enormous house with a compound, in which I had a guard, a gardener, a launderer and my own chef.” Not a bad deal, he says wryly, for an associate professor.

The house, a stone’s throw from the Chinese and American embassies, became a place where parties gave scholars and officialdom, foreign and domestic alike, a chance to discuss critical issues in a relaxed atmosphere. The parties seemed to symbolize the joyous mixture of scholarship and friendship Sloan found everywhere in his “home away from home.”

And then the year was over.

Sloan returned to OU and furthered a respected career in political science studies. A specialist in political violence courses who had traveled extensively in Indonesia and other parts of Asia, Sloan turned his eyes toward a topic that was becoming a focus of world attention—terrorism.

The professor developed the first course listed in a college catalogue on terrorism and also at OU helped put together a 1976 international conference on the subject, which included a simulated skyjacking. Since then, he has conducted more than 18 simulations of terrorist incidents for the benefit of scholars and security authorities in Indonesia, Sweden, Korea, New Zealand, Germany and the Canal Zone, as well as throughout the United States.
Chris told me, "Why sit on a beach in Hawaii when you could share with me a part of your life I didn't get to experience—when you lived in Nepal?"

On his return trip, Steve Sloan found that many changes had come to Kathmandu, his remote and exotic "second home." Here a tradeswoman minds a roadside stand Sloan describes as "a Nepali 7-11."

Sloan crafted and delivered more than 125 presentations on terrorism to state, national and international audiences. He consulted extensively on the subject, and, at the time of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, his expert perspective on the subject was sought by Cable News Network, "CBS Good Morning," the Voice of America and news services in Canada, Japan and throughout much of Europe.

Sloan credits the programs of OU's Department of Political Science with giving him the opportunity to do "some incredible traveling" during his career. Yet he finds that "although you have to leave Oklahoma to do your research, it's a great place to come back to.

"My blood pressure goes down 10 points when I get back here," he says.

In the years after his return from Nepal, Sloan married Roberta Raider, then an OU drama professor who now teaches at the University of Central Oklahoma. They have raised three children: eldest son Christopher, a senior television executive who has worked for NBC and Fox; Gregory, a Desert Storm veteran now finishing an academic degree out-of-state; and daughter Maya, who acts and writes theater in New York—and whose middle name, "Siddhanta," memorializes Sloan's beloved Nepali sister.

All the while, the desire to return to Nepal was "constant but never realized," Sloan says. Then, in 1996, an opportunity finally arose.

"Chris was at NBC, and for my birthday last year, he offered to take me anywhere in the world for what he called 'Chris and Steve's excellent vacation.'"

Sloan initially suggested Hawaii for a stopover, since he was slated to teach in Japan. He recalls his son's response as "wondrous."

"Chris told me, 'Why sit on a beach in Hawaii when you could share with me a part of your life I didn't get to experience—when you lived in Nepal?'"

As their plane neared touchdown at Kathmandu, Sloan wondered what changes had swept the little kingdom in a quarter century's time. But the sight of old friends, including his brother Bikram, melted away Sloan's apprehensions.

"When I was greeted at the airport—which I didn't expect—I felt I had definitely come home. I was very, very happy."

Sloan found his "village" of Kathmandu swollen to a sprawling city of approximately half a million people and saw the mixed blessings of technological change evident in developing countries. "Too many cars, too much pollution and unguided urban growth in the midst of great poverty."

Even some of the humblest dwellings, he notes, boasted satellite dish antennas, which brought popular Western entertainment such as "Baywatch" into the ancient land. The country itself had changed from a tiny traditional kingdom to a constitutional monarchy, which struggled, like many other nations, with the challenges of democracy, human rights and social ferment.

In fact, Nepali leaders took every opportunity to confer with Sloan on matters in which he had developed an expertise since his last visit.

"The first evening I met with the assistant home minister to discuss his concerns over a growing insurgency in
the countryside and the threat of urban terrorism.” He later met with security, police and foreign ministry officials to offer them advice as well—men who “had the responsibility of dealing with the reality of political violence in a land where the gap between the haves and have-nots had widened.”

Sloan cites as a high point of the return trip the opportunity that he and his son had to meet Nepal’s then prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, “who still bore the scars from his incarceration as a student when he fought for democracy in his homeland.” But the personal high point came, he says, in a salute to an old friend.

“I was guest speaker at the Nepali Political Science Association and spoke on ‘Political Change and Issues in Young Democracies.’ I was invited to speak by the association’s president, Professor Sushil Raj Pandey, who had been one of my students at Tribhuvan University. My old friend and mentor, Rishesh Shaha, was there, and I was extremely pleased that I could single him out. It was my way of saying ‘thank you’ to a man who, despite the loss of his wife, Siddhanta, and the price he paid for his activism, was still fighting for human rights.”

As the images of those Nepali friends and the sounds and sights of Kathmandu come to life one more time on the VCR in Sloan’s office, he sighs and admits that he would like to go back one more time—and bring some students with me.” His words and his countenance give no impression at all of a man thinking of retirement.

“One of my main desires in the years ahead is helping to develop the Oklahoma City Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism and Violence. Plus, I’m enjoying mentoring my graduate students, and I'm still having a lot of fun with my undergraduate students.”

Sloan finds the work keeps him young, in part because it brings out the latent showman. He talks nostalgically about the New York City days when his father served on the board of governors of the Friar’s Club, and young Stephen met a wide array of show business people. He never was interested in going before the footlights himself but finds that teaching is, in a way, even better than theatre.

“I’ve always maintained that one good thing about teaching is that we are allowed to perform—but we grade the audience!” he says with good-natured laughter.

With an assured grin, he adds, “I’ll stay around a while longer.”