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Pearl Fellow coming to Berkshires

By Jenn Smith, The Berkshire Eagle
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For the first time, the Alfred Friendly Press Fellowship, in partnership with the Daniel Pearl Foundation, has selected a fellow for assignment in the Berkshires.

In April, Ghanashyam Ojha of Nepal, a senior-level reporter at The Kathmandu Post, will be joining the newsrooms of The Berkshire Eagle and the North Adams Transcript, where Pearl began his career, and The Advocate.

Pearl, 38, the Wall Street Journal's South Asia bureau chief, was researching a story on Islamic extremists in Pakistan when he was kidnapped and killed in 2002 by men with ties to al-Qaida.

This year, eight journalists — including two Daniel Pearl Fellows — were chosen from an applicant pool of 80. Journalists for the fellowships are considered from regions where Pearl worked — South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

The five-month fellowship is designed for journalists to gain a working knowledge of the free press in the United States, provide them with a professional experience they can share with colleagues at home, and create continuing ties between free press institutions and journalists in the United States, as well as their counterparts in other countries.

"Interacting and dialogue is a way to make change," said Jackie Gelfand, executive director of the Daniel Pearl Foundation. "It means, if I know you, understand you, I won't want to hurt you."

"For our editors and fellow reporters, it adds a new dimension to something we try to do already," said Martin Langeveld, publisher of the Transcript. "We'd like to make (Ojha's time here) something of interest to our readers, to see through his eyes and his perspective."

For Ojha, 34, this will be his first visit to America.

He was born and raised in Jhapa, Nepal, a country in crisis since the brutal slaying of King Birendra and 12 other royal family members on June 1, 2001.

In the meantime, Nepal has been caught in a bloody battle between a suspect monarchy and a Maoist insurgency that wishes to replace it with a communist republic.

Just last week at The Post, Ojha found himself covering a mass political protest and a Maoist attack, which resulted in the deaths of 14 policemen in Thankot and Dadhikot, near Kathmandu.

On Friday, Jan. 20, the government declared a national curfew and swept the area, arresting a number of political leaders, human rights activists and journalists.

That day, Ojha sent an e-mail to his friends and colleagues that said, in part: "My office is by the side of the main road. The road is empty except sometimes army convoys with armies pointing guns at empty street. It's really strange in Nepal."

Ojha, who had been arrested once while in the field, said that while he didn't hide out, he was careful to avoid walking the streets and security personnel while carrying out his work.

He said he often thinks of Pearl during these times of turmoil.

"I always respected Danny for his fight for justice and universal harmony," he said. "I am sure everybody can't be like Danny, but we can get a lot if we try to read him and his message."

In recent e-mail correspondence with The Eagle this week, he said he is looking forward to the change of pace.

"Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world, and it is great opportunity to study journalism in America," he said. "Being a journalist, I believe in the power of people."

'I think I'm lucky'

He said he would be most interested in working on human interest stories in the Berkshires. As a part-time English literature and language teacher in the Himalayan WhiteHouse International College in Kathmandu, he also has a strong interest in education.

"I love hiking and traveling to new places," he said. "I think I am lucky to stay in the Berkshires."