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Rt. Hon Helen Clark

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Fred Hollows Foundation "An Evening with Sir Edmund Hillary," Hyatt Auckland

It is a pleasure to be here this evening at the invitation of the Fred Hollows Foundation to pay tribute to Sir Edmund Hillary. I would like to thank him and Lady Hillary for being here with us this evening.

Sir Edmund and the late Fred Hollows have both been a source of inspiration to people around the world. Both have worked to improve the lives of people much less fortunate than we are: Sir Edmund through the Himalayan Trust, and Fred Hollows through his passion for eliminating avoidable blindness.

My primary task tonight is to pay tribute to Sir Edmund. It is a task one accepts as an honour because of his achievements and of what he represents to New Zealand.

Ed Hillary and Tensing Norgay's ascent of Mount Everest in 1953 remains one of the outstanding accomplishments of the twentieth century. It earned both men well deserved international acclaim for their endurance and courage. It also had a marked effect on the way we New Zealanders regarded ourselves and our country. It was a triumph of skill, courage, and endurance in which, as a nation, New Zealand took enormous pride.

As a small time climber myself, I marvel at their achievement with 1950s technology.

Sir Edmund's feats were not confined to mountaineering. He was also the first person to reach the South Pole with vehicles, using modified Ferguson tractors in his expedition of 1956-58. In doing so, he helped establish Scott Base. Ed has a big trip back to Antarctica later this month.

In 1960, Sir Edmund's attention turned back to the Himalayas with the establishment of the Himalayan Trust – a cause which has played such a big role in his life - to improve the health and education of the Sherpa people and to help protect the Himalayas.

The results have been extraordinary:

- § Two hospitals and thirteen health clinics have been built.
- § Over 30 schools have been built
- § Over 100 students receive grants annually from the Trust for further and higher education.
- § For Sherpas, improvements in life expectancy have been achieved through programmes to control tuberculosis, smallpox and other life-threatening infectious diseases. Stillbirth and infant mortality has been reduced.
- § Almost 100,000 young trees are nurtured each year and more than one million have been planted in 25 protected sites.
- § Isolated communities are helped to re-build washed away bridges and tracks and drinking water systems have been constructed.

Sir Edmund was also instrumental in setting up the Sagarmatha National Park in the valleys below Everest. He approached the Nepal and New Zealand Governments for support and both agreed. When the park opened in 1976, New Zealand provided funds and initial forestry and park staff while the Himalayan Trust established nurseries and funded training for Sherpas in park management.

Sir Edmund's standing in South Asia is immense. When David Lange took the decision to re-open a New Zealand High Commission in India in the 1980s, Sir Ed was his inspired choice to lead it.

Last year saw celebrations on a grand scale here, in Nepal, and elsewhere to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the ascent of Everest.

Among many significant events, a bronze statue of Sir Edmund was unveiled outside The Heritage, Mount Cook, looking out to the mountains he climbed. On the same day the Prime Minister of Nepal made him an honorary citizen of that country.

Sir Edmund has received numerous medals and decorations from countries around the world – including New Zealand's highest honour, the Order of New Zealand - and is still today revered as one of the world's leading adventurers, humanitarians and environmentalists. And, of course, New Zealand's \$5 note bears his image.

In honouring Sir Edmund tonight, we are honouring someone who represents both inspiration and decency. He also represents something very important to New Zealanders: humility and modesty.

It is fitting that celebrating Sir Edmund's life also enables us to support the Fred Hollows Foundation. Like Sir Edmund's concern for the wellbeing of the Sherpa people, Fred Hollows was deeply concerned with the health status of Australian Aboriginal people and for all those blinded by avoidable eye disease.

Fred Hollows responded by establishing sustainable eye health care and treatment programmes. Today these include lens manufacturing laboratories in Kathmandu (Nepal) and Asmara (Eritrea), which now produce intraocular lens for cataract surgery at 3.5 per cent of the cost of competitors, making eye surgery more affordable and accessible for poor communities.

People with disabilities, including sight disability, are over-represented among poor communities around the world. The Foundation's work is one very practical way of improving the lives of people with disability.

The Fred Hollows Foundation (NZ) is focusing on the Pacific region. It is providing comprehensive eye health programmes in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, and a regional programme covering Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and the Cook Islands. They work with those governments to establish eye-care services, to train doctors and nurses, and to provide equipment and systems so that high quality eye care is available to Pacific island peoples.

It can be said without exaggeration that the Himalayan Trust and the Fred Hollows Foundation have changed the lives of many people for the better. I am delighted to be present tonight at an evening of fundraising that will further advance humanitarian work of the kind which Sir Edmund and Fred Hollows have always stood for.