



HELPING HANDS CAMBODIA NEWSLETTER

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For a change, instead of me writing this newsletter, this update comes direct from our volunteers "in the field" (or who have been in the field recently).

We are extremely fortunate to have Meaghan volunteering with us for a whole year. Meaghan, from New York, is completing a Masters Degree in International Public Service and Development and joined the Helping Hands team in October. Her husband, Larry, is a doctor and he is volunteering for a year at Angkor Children's hospital. Here is Meaghan's first story.....



HELPING HANDS "WORK FOR A BICYCLE" PROGRAM

There is so much movement in Prasat Char. People are coming and going. All day long. All ages. In all directions. The Helping Hands's "Work for Bikes" Project has been a spark of change in the community and everyone can see the difference.



Young adults waking up with the sun as they ride into Siem Reap for a day of construction work. Seven-year-olds stretching up to grip the handlebars and down to move the pedals on their adult-sized bikes as they ride to school. Students creating some very unique ways of strapping themselves to friends' bikes in order to overcome the hour long walk to school. Old men balancing the day's crop, freshly picked from the distant fields, on the back of their bikes as they pedal home. Traffic jamming at the narrow bridge when English class finishes and people return from long day in Siem Reap.

Every household in Prasat Char has now earned a bicycle. But some people think they earned more than just a bike. A mother of seven proudly smiles as she explains how she also earned dignity. She appreciates Helping Hand's approach to distributing bicycles, not as a handout but an opportunity for her to help herself. A hand up. The "Work for Goods" Projects builds people's capacity to help themselves.



The village leader's assistant believes that villagers feel ownership of their bicycles and therefore take better care of them. A single woman earned a bicycle even though she did not know how to ride one, but now she is learning because she is excited about independently going places.



A young mother explains how rice wine consumption and gambling has decreased. Her neighbors now have the opportunity to go to work and choose to be productive instead of "wasting time." Many children now have the opportunity to go to school because they can overcome the long distances with their bikes.

The community came together to work on different organized improvement projects, such as fixing roads and building the school. Numerous people commented on the enjoyable experience of working together with their neighbors. This was the first time many came together as a village to work on cooperative projects. They learned valuable skills of team building and the power of cooperation while building their relationships. A woman says she now feels lonely and lazy when she works alone.



Helping Hands uncovers opportunities for continued community development when talking

about the "Work for Bikes" Project with villagers. Young men and women in the village share ideas about future community projects, including building a vocational training center, building community toilets, building more wells, and fixing more roads. The village leader explained that the community needs another bridge.

Helping Hands's "Work for Bikes" Project has been a huge success. Everyone can see the difference, but it is also the internal changes in people where the biggest transformations lie.

Since we started the bike program 16 months ago we have given out over 300 bicycles - all which were "earnt" by the villagers. In the New Year (2008) we will start the bicycle program in a neighbouring village.

KOREN'S STORY

Koren is a 21 year old lady from the Barossa Valley in South Australia. Before coming to visit us she single-handedly raised a staggering \$6,000! This is Koren's account of her time volunteering with us.

Living in Cambodia for one month was one of the most amazing experiences of my life.

Volunteering overseas had always been a pipedream for me, so when I heard about Deborah's cause last year and sent her an email, I didn't expect her eager answer - something like "when can you come" if I remember correctly!

It was with a great sense of excitement and a little trepidation that I boarded the plane to head off into Cambodia in July - my first real trip overseas.

I quickly discovered a country of contradictions. The expansive houses and large cars of the rich contrasted uncomfortably with a background of extreme poverty. I was constantly shocked by the high levels of rubbish, the rundown roads (which we wouldn't even call tracks at home), the dirty clothing, the people piled high on one small motorbike.



But upon meeting the children of the Helping Hands school - and the irrepressible Cambodian director, Chanti - I felt I'd discovered the real Cambodia, something beyond just the temples and tourists.

Over three weeks I spent most afternoons at the school, helping Chanti and the other Cambodian teachers with their English lessons. One of my first tasks was to sharpen a box of pencils and I was quickly surrounded by about 15 eager faces, all ready to help. It was the first of many such encounters at the school, with a group of children unlike any I had ever met before.



They were all so friendly, beautiful and eager to learn, despite the harsh realities of their lives. They taught me a lot about life... in fact, at times I felt like I was getting more out of the experience than the children were.



About halfway through my trip, Deb, Chanti and I decided to buy all of the students new uniforms using some money I had raised before leaving

Australia .

After measuring up the kids we headed to the markets to bombard a clothes store owner with our requests. We bought two uniforms for each school child, which meant roughly 800 items - you can imagine my surprise when the bill came to the measly total of about \$2,000 (aud).



New uniforms may sound like a simple thing, but most of the kids had never felt the clean fabric of brand new clothes against their skin. In fact, many of them owned only one set of clothes. The excited chattering outside the school as the uniforms were handed out was heart warming and each child walked around with a real sense of pride in their new attire.



I also had a chance to sleep 'Cambodian style' on the school floor one night, after the children put on a special concert raising awareness about the dangers of Dengue Fever. This disease was (and likely still is) causing the deaths of hundreds of children across Cambodia .



The concert was put together in a matter of days as the Dengue Fever epidemic worsened and I came to see how Deb operates her charity: if something needs doing you just do it... right now if possible!



My time in Cambodia certainly was life changing and settling back in at home in the affluent Barossa Valley has been hard. Cambodia changed my perspective and made me realise just how lucky some of us are.

Looking at Deb's tireless work in the Prasat Char village also made me realise that we can make a difference - even from another country. A small donation goes a really long way in Cambodia , and with Deborah and Chanti as guardians, our help can only improve life for the families and children of the village.

*Thank you for taking
the time to read this
and thank you for
caring.*

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