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AFTER MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF BLINDNESS, LOEUM GETS HER SIGHT RESTORED

Every now and then, something happens that makes me feel truly blessed and privileged to be doing this work. The story below describes one of those situations.....

It is a story from Meaghan (our volunteer in the field) about Voch Loeum, one of our villagers who has been blind for more than 20 years.

.....Almost every Saturday, for the past four months, Voch Loeum, has come to Dr Phara’s clinic as a patient with Helping Hands eye treatment programme. Loeum has been blind for more than 20 years. After 9 visits, 3 cataract surgeries, numerous post-op check ups and a lovely new pair of glasses, Loeum has evolved before my eyes.



In November, she looked so sullen and withdrawn. Both eyes had substantial cataracts. She had lost her vision more than 20 years ago. All she saw of the world was darkness. She has over 30 grandchildren and has never seen them. She only knew them through their voices.

After all her treatment, two weeks ago, the darkness grew into light, and then into fuzzy objects.

Today she was acting like a giddy teenager. Her treatment was over and all that was left to do was go to the optician to get her some prescription glasses. The young store clerk put the large testing glasses on her and for thirty minutes, she walked around the store in awe. She stared in complete confusion at a poster of a model modelling glasses. She stared at the traffic outside in shock. She looked at herself in the mirror and just absorbed the reflection. Layers of hard years, pain and frustration washed off her face. She giggled.



The store clerk called her over so she could try on frames. She told her to sit down. Instead of sitting on the high stool near the counter Loeum sat right down on the floor. The store clerk smiled and told her to sit on the stool. Loeum had some difficulty as she tentatively pulled herself up onto the stool. She let out a brief scream; afraid she was going to fall out. She giggled again.



The store clerk helped her try on some frames. Loeum was concerned because she couldn’t see as well with the ordinary frames. She wanted to keep the large testing glasses. The store clerk assured her that she would put the right lenses in her frames.



After choosing a pair and getting the lenses made, Loeum gazed at herself in a full-length mirror admiring the reflection. She adjusted her shoulders and stood up a little taller.



She gave me the biggest smile and got ready to leave. I felt so lucky to have been able to witness such an amazing transformation.



I was smiling from ear to ear as I watched Loeum prepare to walk out into the world with sight for the first time in 20 years. Unfortunately, she walked right into the glass door and looked at it in confusion as she wondered how to open it. This was her first interaction with a door. Usually, she would always have someone else leading her everywhere.

I stayed behind her and motioned the action. She really struggled but managed to push it open. She might be learning a lot of new things in the near future. But I think she will enjoy it. There is so much newness, and of course, her grandchildren to discover.



Footnote from Deborah: When talking with Loeum back in the village one of the things she was most happy about was that she now got to eat more meat. When Cambodian families sit down to eat it is a communal affair with the food placed in the middle. If you can't see where the "good stuff" is, you miss out!

By the way, you might be wondering how **much it actually cost to restore Loeum's sight**. You can go to the end of this newsletter which shows the most common eye problems and the measly amounts it costs to treat them.

The village of Prasat Char is part of a commune. There are 13 villages that make up our commune and each village has its own village leader and each commune has its own commune leader who looks after all the villages (sort of like a mayor.)

Recently Chanty and Meaghan had an appointment to meet with our commune and village leader to discuss our work. When they arrived for their appointment they discovered that there were many other commune and villager leaders also at the commune center that day.

Here is Chanty's report on his conversations with the leaders that day. This is a rough translation from Khmer to English so please excuse the bad grammar.

THE COMMUNE LEADER SAID..... By Ho Chanty



“Every village that Helping Hands decides to work at is so lucky, for example, look at the village called Prasat Char. There have been so many big changes there such as infrastructure, the education of the children, etc.”, the Commune Leader, Mr Hung, said.

They have seen so many other organisations working at their villages and other villages in the area, but there is not much difference to the villages before the organization arrived and after they have worked there.

At the end of the meeting they invited Meaghan and I to join them for lunch. Our commune leader, Mr Hung, and many other village leaders at the lunch were so impressed with what we are doing. Many of the other commune and village leaders wanted us to work in their villages. They said even if we just come and visit and have a look around, it still would be wonderful. I felt so proud!

Mr Hung said he is keen to show us around the other communes if we want to do that someday. He also said, “Helping Hands is the strangest organization he has ever seen in Cambodia, maybe even in the world, because everything that we decide to do leads to big changes. Of all the organisations's he knows Helping Hands is his favourite and his most special partner.”

Mr Hung also said, we are a strange organization because first we learn from the people we are trying to help. We learn what skills they already have and then try to build on them.



HELPING HANDS EYE CARE PROGRAMME - STATISTICS

We started this programme about 6 months ago (October 07) in response to the need we saw in the village for people to get eye treatment. They didn't know where to go for help and even if they did know where to go they simply couldn't afford it, even though the cost is ridiculously cheap compared to Western standards.

- Number of villagers who have received eye treatment = 26
- Average number of visits to the eye doctor per patient = 3
- Cost to transport one villager to the eye doctor = US\$7.00 (or less if they double up). (Helping Hands organises motorcycle drivers from the village to transport patients who don't have their own means of getting into Siem Reap. This, therefore, provides an economic opportunity for many people.)
- Cost of consultation = US\$5
- Cost of medication = US\$5 to US\$10
- Cost of surgery = US\$60 - US\$75



- Changes in a person's life = beautiful

Number of patients with diagnosis:

- Trichinosis = 2
- Allergic
- Fungal infection – 1
- Congenital Glaucoma = 1
- Microphthalmos = 1

- Pterygium = 9 (1 or both eyes)
- Cataracts = 6
- Myopia = 5

conjunctivitis = 1

Number of patients with treatment:

- Pterygium Surgeries = 15
- Cataract surgeries = 3
- Glasses = 4
- Trichinosis Surgeries = 2
- Monthly conjunctivitis medicine = 1
- Glaucoma Surgery = 1
- Anti-fungal treatment = 1

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

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