

Newsletter 16 - Happy Easter and Happy Cambodian New Year!

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Cambodian New Year



One great thing about Cambodia is that you get to celebrate the New Year three times. First of all there's the western New Year on December 31st, then Chinese New Year in early February followed thirdly in April by the Cambodian New Year. The New Year celebrations don't just last one night but go over a whole week (though officially its three days) and there is a very festive atmosphere in the air. It's a time to start anew. Cambodians clean out their homes, give each other gifts, such as new clothes, and visit pagodas. It's a time to pay homage to their deceased relatives to keep them happy and ensure good luck for the coming year. Even the poorest Cambodian families will buy or make New Year decorations and put up shrines and offerings for the deceased relatives.



There are many traditions associated with the holiday and the two most obvious ones to foreigners involve water and talcum powder. Elders are blessed with a small amount of pure, clean water. Over the years though, this has basically evolved into full scale water fights. The talcum powder is rubbed on faces as a blessing for good luck. Last year Angela, Anna, Ingrid and myself threw ourselves into the holiday spirit and joined in the festivities. As you can see from the photos, things can get a little crazy!!!



Another teacher and new classes - Our school continues to grow. Chanti has begun teaching some of the English classes and we are employing another English teacher, a young lady called Savorn. Savorn will start straight after the Cambodian New Year holiday and will teach in the mornings. *(The photo on the right shows me interviewing Savorn)*. This will take the pressure of Sopeap - 300 students are just too many for one teacher.



As well as our English classes we are also teaching Cambodian adult literacy classes and have just started children's remedial classes (see Ram's story below for more information about the remedial classes).



New room for adult classes - yes, we are still building! A separate room has just been completed for adult classes. As usual, we asked the villagers to help and in return they were eligible to get a bicycle from us. This means more than 240 households have received bikes from us.

Toilet - the construction of the toilet at our school is well underway. It is not completely finished but it is able to be used. We are going to add a rain water collection tank, hand washing basin and shower in the near future. This is the very first toilet in the village.





More books - we have received another very generous donation of books from another organisation called Sipar. They gave us 240 books to use in our adult literacy classes. The books are designed to be used to teach Cambodian reading and writing but the content of the books covers agricultural information so the student learns better/new agricultural practices at the same time as learning to read and write.

Ram's story - one step forward, two steps back. Ram is 11 years old. She lives in a very small house right next to our school with her mother, Vi, married sister and her husband and baby. Ram has no father, he died 4 years ago. Being a single parent in any country can be difficult, but even more so in Cambodia. The family also owns no land which means they can't grow any rice. This puts them amongst the poorest of the poor.



Before we opened our school Ram had not attended school at all. I had been trying to encourage her to go to the public school for quite a while. When we started building the school I asked Ram's mother if Ram would be attending our school (their house is literally 3 meters from the it.) She told me the problem was that they often had to go away to find work (labouring on other people's farms) and hence, she would miss too much school. So, in other words, no she wouldn't. I asked her what she thought the solution was to their situation, and didn't she want a better future for her daughter? After thinking about it for a minute she said that because her house is so close to the school that if she had a bit of money she could start up a small shop and sell things to the students. I was very encouraged that she had come up with her own idea and thought it was a great plan. I immediately told her we would help her to set up a shop.



The change in the attitude of Ram's mother was amazing. She began doing labouring at the school so that she could get a bicycle from us. We then lent her some money so that she could buy palm leaves and make up the palm leaf panels that we use for the walls of the school. Ram and her married sister also worked very hard. If they weren't working on the school they were making the palm leaf panels. When the panels were finished we then bought them off them which gave Vi about \$10 to start up her shop. She also received a bike for working on the school construction and was then able to use the bike to go to market and buy products to sell to the students. Her little business was quite a success.



Quite often for the poorest people, it really is one step forward, two steps back. In December both Ram and her mother got quite ill and all the money they had made from the shop was spent on medical expenses. The shop had to close as there was no money to restock it. I was in Australia at the time and when Chanti called me and told me what happened he and I both agreed we should give them another \$10 (as a loan) so she could start up again. After all, it wasn't their fault they got sick. They happily started selling things to the students again, but then trouble struck a third time. Another of Vi's married daughters who lives in another village had trouble with a pregnancy and became very ill. Once again, the little cash they had made was spent on medical concerns.

Once again, we've decided to help them out - as it really isn't their fault that troubles keep befalling them - it just shows how difficult it is to break out of the poverty trap. Now that we are going to be having morning classes at the school Vi wants to be able to sell fish soup to the students. Fish are quite plentiful in the waterways around the school but Vi has no pots

dishes, etc. We are going to provide her with the cooking equipment that she needs. Hopefully, this time things will go smoothly.



But back to little Ram. I'm pleased to say that she has been attending English classes almost from the start. In the beginning she was a bit too intimidated to join the classes but with encouragement she finally started studying and is a very diligent student. Obviously though, she also needs to read and write in her own language and study all the other regular school subjects so we still need to get her into the public school system. To that end, we have started what we are calling "**children's remedial classes**" three times a week. They are primarily for school aged children who haven't been to school at all. We hope that by giving them some basic Cambodian reading, writing and numeracy skills they will feel less intimidated about eventually going to the public school. We hope they will study with us until the new school year starts (in November) and then move into the public school.

Ram is a very bright and happy girl and is always willing to help out. I can always count on her to help tidy up the books in the reading room, or clean up after a drawing session and I can always count on her to give me one of her wonderful smiles.....

Hopefully, she can now look forward to a better future.

