

This page explains how I initially got involved with helping Prasat Char village.

MR SOM'S STORY

August 2005

Mr Som was a resident of Prasat Char Village. When I first met him he had been extremely ill for over a year and a half with tuberculosis. Due to the fact that he was so poor and his village is quite remote he had not been able to access any medical care.



Mr Som when I first met him.

After meeting Mr Som and his family I felt obliged to offer them help, which they gratefully accepted. We carried Mr Som out of the village on a stretcher and took him to a private medical clinic. Unfortunately, the clinic we took him to saw this as a chance to take advantage of the generosity of a foreigner and tried to tell me they could have him healthy and back in his village within two weeks, but it was going to cost AUD\$1,700.00! It was quite obvious to anyone who saw Mr Som that he was gravely ill and that there was no way (barring a miracle) that he would be well in a matter of a couple of weeks.



Carrying Mr Som out of village.

(It was at this point that I realised I could not do this on my own and I put out the call for financial help from family and friends. I was completely overwhelmed at the generosity of everyone. Within a couple of days I had more than enough money to help Mr Som with a substantial amount left over. This is how I began the continuing aid work that I do at Prasat Char village and I am still amazed (and eternally grateful) for the continued financial support from not only family and friends but also strangers who hear about my work.)



Mr Som in the clinic.

Realising that the private clinic was only trying to take advantage of the situation and were not really concerned for Mr Som we moved him to the provincial hospital. The facilities at the provincial hospital were very basic to say the least, but at least the staff were a little more realistic about the gravity of Mr Som's condition. They were, perhaps, a little too realistic and didn't see any point in trying to help him survive. I pleaded with them to at least try, and to that end they advised me what medications he needed (the hospital doesn't provide them) and I duly sought them out at the local pharmacies.



Mr Som in hospital.

Unfortunately, it was all a little too late, and Mr Som passed away about ten days after we took him out of the village.



PART TWO

Hello everybody,

Welcome, once again to my newsletter. First of all I want to sincerely thank everyone for your messages of sympathy, condolences and emotional support, as well as your very generous financial support with regard to Mr Som and his family. Your emotional support was most valuable - it gave me great strength to know so many people cared. And the financial support is helping to make some real positive differences to the people in Mr Som's village, which is called Prasat Char.

As you know, Mr Som lost his battle with his illness and passed away about two weeks ago. Since then much has happened. Mrs Som and her family are doing quite well considering.

I'd like to tell you about Mr Som's funeral as it was rather different to the way we deal with such things. (I sincerely hope that my descriptions are not too graphic, but it was all extremely interesting.) The majority of Cambodian's are Buddhist. Cambodian's are very superstitious about spirits, etc, and as such, once Mr Som had died nobody was prepared to transport his body back to his village. Unfortunately, I was in Phnom Penh at this time so I had to leave my friend, You Sa, to help with all the details. As I just mentioned, there was no way to get his body back to his village (which would have been preferable) so instead You Sa bought his children in from the village to Siem Reap. You Sa then organised with, what I suppose would be the equivalent of an undertaker in our culture, to (for an exorbitant fee) take Mr Som's body from the hospital to a nearby pagoda to be cremated. A monk was arranged and a small ceremony took place. As you would expect, it was obviously a very sad affair for Mrs Som and her children.

Mr Som's ashes then had to be transported back to the village where monks would then be consulted as to the most auspicious time to hold our equivalent to a funeral and wake, but which they refer to as the "celebration". You Sa refused to transport Mr Som's ashes in his car because of his fear and belief in spirits. He told me bluntly that he would not do it as his car was working well and if he carried the ashes in it he was sure to start having mechanical problems. The problem was solved by Mrs Som carrying them on the back of a motorbike. The ashes were kept in a tree outside of Mrs Som's hut as, once again, until the official funeral/celebration had been held they were too afraid of his spirit to keep them inside.

A date was finally set for the following week to hold the funeral/celebration. I returned from Phnom Penh to take part in the proceedings. A young guy from Alaska, called Andy, also expressed an interest in visiting the village and I assured him that no-one would have any problem with him attending the funeral. (It just so happens that Andy is studying to be a doctor and is in Phnom Penh volunteering at a hospital, which proved to be quite an exciting development - but that's another story.) As I had been helping the family and was paying some of the funeral expenses I was considered an honoured guest.

The preparations for the funeral, which would be held over two days, began several days before the event. All the neighbours came and helped build two shelters. One which would house the five monks and one which would be used for cooking. It was quite amazing watching them construct the shelters using no "man made" products. Everything that they used they got from nature (such as vines, tree trunks and sticks, banana leaves, etc).

This photos shows two of the villagers making an altar out of tree trunks (Banana trees I think).



The picture on the left shows us shopping for food in the local market. A life will be a good one. To that end, many "offerings" had to be made to the monks. These offerings took the form of gifts of incense, cigarettes, clothing, food and money. (My personal feeling was that the monks were personally profiting from the grief of others - but I know I'm just being unreasonably cynical. It just seemed to me that the money spent could have been used more wisely. Mind you in comparative terms this funeral certainly cost a fraction of what we would spend in the West and it gives the family great comfort to know that their loved one would be provided for in his next life.)

So now, on to the actual ceremony. It started on Sunday morning and compared to the solemn, grief filled atmosphere of one of our funerals, the people did seem to be enjoying a celebration. Very loud music was played most of the time.



Proceedings started with a ritual consisting of prayer and chanting that was performed over a small effigy made out of flour and water that I assume was supposed to represent Mr Som. Unfortunately, the weather was quite wild and we had to deal with quite heavy rain showers interspersed with blazing sun

shine.



Although Mr Som's body had already been cremated, as part of the ceremony they would cremate his remains a second time. The villagers made a coffin out of thin timber which was decorated with special bright funeral paper. Close family and friends had their heads shaved, including their eyebrows, and their hair was later thrown into the funeral pyre. They believe this gives Mr Som intelligence in his next life. The most emotionally wrenching part of the ceremony was when they went up one by one to throw their hair into the fire.



Around four o'clock in the afternoon, after a long day of rituals and chanting, a funeral procession was assembled consisting of two carts which were joined together with a special rope. On the first cart sat the head monk, while the remaining four monks stood on the second cart surrounding the coffin. The first cart, which looked extremely heavy, was actually lifted and carried to the site of the funeral pyre and the second cart was pushed and pulled (you can see Andy by the wheel of the cart). The procession had to go around the site several times to signify that Mr Som's spirit was still lost. Eventually, the procession halted and everyone attending gathered small sticks and the fire was lit. There was constant chanting and symbolic rituals happening. The jovial mood was replaced with a more sombre mood, just as you would expect at one of our funerals. Unfortunately, the weather also chose this moment to turn nasty again.



I was really surprised with the jovial mood of the whole celebration, but as you can see by these two photos of Mr Som's sister, and as you would expect, it was tinged with moments of real grief and sadness. Andy and I left the celebration around five o'clock exhausted, wet and sunburnt. The rest of the people continued to celebrate into the evening with dancing and eating. I didn't attend the following day, but the celebration continued until the afternoon.



The photo on the left shows the funeral pyre. Once the coffin has been burnt, the fire is put out - again with

I have to say that I felt quite privileged to be able to take part in the celebration. It was a moving and fascinating experience.

There's much, much more to report on what's been happening over here, but so that this newsletter doesn't get too long I will follow it up with another one in the next day or so. As well as filling you in on details of what I have been doing with your financial assistance, I'll also continue on with the story about Andy that I alluded to earlier - I promise its a much more pleasant one than this one.



Warmest regards to you all,

Deborah.