

Self Reliance School

The Beginning:

Early on a Sunday morning a gaggle of wide-eyed children line up quietly in front of a modest house in in Prey Roka, Cambodia, one of the typical poor villages where the vast majority of the Khmer population resides.



“I told them that there is no school on Sundays”, says Ms. Channy Sor, the teacher/ director of the school “but they come anyway in the hope that I will relent and start classes anyway. They are so hungry for knowledge that they even walk miles to get here.”

Behind the house rises a make-shift structure on raw wooden pillars with a grass roof and sheets of canvas as walls. On the bare dirt floor neatly arranged rough timber benches and tables wait for the children to absorb

knowledge they don’t get anywhere else, not even in the government school if they are so lucky to be able to attend one at all.

“We don’t want to compete with any existing schools”, explains Channy, “we want our children to put their creativity and talents to use without any numbing pressure of discipline and memorizing.

4 months ago we started out with only 5 students, and now the number swelled to 64, ages 4 to 13, with more lining up. “They just came by word of mouth, some even from other villages far away”, reports teacher Vith, “but we ran out of space.”



The Teaching:

On weekday afternoons Channy and her sisters Vith and Sim volunteer 2 hours of their time to let the children practice their English, Khmer reading and writing. The children also learn skills such handicrafts and sports. And, most importantly, we teach health!



“From our point of view”, says Dr. Gunther Hintz, director of Medicorps with 35 years of development experience in poor countries, “they must learn about healthy behaviors specific to underprivileged regions which are crucial to breaking the cycle of poverty and dependency.”

“We need to check the children’s’ temperature at the start of classes”, adds Vith. “Often these children come with fevers, running noses and hacking coughs. When we have to send them home, they leave with tears in their eyes.”

Under the happy laughter, banter and eager concentration a host of health issues lurk, from poor nutrition to parasites, festering wounds and chronic bacterial infections. No wonder, a cursory inspection of the village shows glaring deficiencies in even the most rudimentary health mandates, such as hygiene, clean water, nutrition, vector control, waste disposal etc.

“So much money is spent worldwide on these public health issues”, muses Dr. Hintz, “yet very little progress can be verified. E.g. after many millions of dollars spent on eradicating stunted growth in Cambodia, we saw but a marginal drop from 50% to 40%. So, we start with the young ones and have them promote healthy behaviors among their parents, siblings and groups.”

The kids’ point of view:

“I already know more than my younger friends”, declares 13 year old Monyreaksmey; “now I want to help as well and share what I know with them. It makes me proud to volunteer for my community.” 9 years Dynan, chimes in: “Yeah, when teacher Channy asked us, you know, what we like to call our school, because it had no name, we said “Happy”, “Happy School”, ‘cause we are happy here!”



The parents’ point of view:

Nothing is more telling than the gradual appearance of parents, unprompted, with small bags of rice bananas and what else they could afford from their meager budget to feed the children while in school. “For us it’s a great blessing that one of our community makes this unexpected effort to give a future to our

children”, says the humble farmwoman, Mrs Hing , still young at 34, but bent and worn from the years of hard labor in the rice paddies. “I pray that we can sustain an effort such as this”, she adds and self consciously wipes a tear from her once pretty face.

The Plan:

“All assistance must come to an endpoint, the point of self-sustainability”, declares Dr. Hintz relying on his long experience in managing disasters. “No donor wants to give forever. Grassroots development, growing out of, and owned by the local community, is essential.

Here are the steps:

- Finish the school building, already financed by generous ‘angels’ (\$7,000)
- Buy furniture for the classrooms and office (\$5,500)
- Provide start-up supplies and teaching materials (\$4,000)
- Expand partnerships with universities and colleges overseas (\$0)
- Implement rigorous evaluation of the impact of our teaching (\$5,500)
- Encourage research projects centered on learning and public health (grants)
- Seek scholarships for gifted students graduated from our school (\$1,000/student/year)
- Encourage alumni associations to support school independently of donations(\$0)
- Sell products of vocational training to generate funds

