

From: "rgarms tds.net" <rgarms@tds.net>
Date: Wed, 9 Mar 2011 07:06:53 -0800
To: Jan Pfeiffer <jan.pfeiffer@lumos.org.uk>
Subject: Re: Scholl in Cambodia

Dear Jan,

Yes, please feel free to share all of this with your group. The following email is a more personal view of our project. Sarith is my closest and most trusted friend of the last twenty years. We have done a number of personal and community projects together and know each other well. He was the inspiration for this project, started after his first return to Cambodia. You can read Sarith's story and see his picture on our web site at: <www.khmerschool.org <<http://www.khmerschool.org>> >. Click on "Sarith's Story" on the home page.

You can see Sarith's picture on the site, and I have attached my picture to this. The little girl is Sarith's nephew's child. It was taken last month at our annual party for our school project family (everyone who works with us - we had 50 guests). All of our teachers, sewing girls, principals and the many members of Sarith's family who help us were included. We had speeches, beer, and much laughter, of course.

The personal and family element are central to us. For one thing, it is easy to be cheated as outsiders in a desperately poor country. A friend married to a Lao woman told me that Caucasians in Laos used to be called "Watermelon noses." This is true enough (see picture), as most Lao people have delicate features. Russians, he said, were referred to as "Watermelon noses without money." As watermelon noses with money, we need to find ways to be more part of Khmer life. Cambodian village culture is a network of trust based on kinship and family loyalty. Being part of Sarith's family helps us be inside the village culture.

As for values, we employ and support the poorest people in the village first (true communism, Sarith and I joke). This is not just for economic support, but also to raise their social status, one of Sarith's brilliant ideas. Village culture is like an Indian caste system, with the poor at the very bottom. Women, especially those without husbands, have the lowest status. That is why we hired eldest daughters without parents as sewing girls - it raises their low status as well as providing for their younger siblings and grandparents. With higher status they not only get more respect, they have a better chance of marrying (several have).

There are many layers to a project like this, including many personal stories. One example is Sarith's nephew Chey (he would not at all mind you knowing this) was told by astrologers to not marry the woman he deeply loved. Cambodian astrology is based on the birth dates of mythical kings. The kings whose birthdays the couple in love were born on were incompatible in nature. The families (who sent them to the astrologers) opposed the marriage based on this tradition. The couple were despondent and Chey's fiancée made her family miserable with all of her crying and wailing. Sarith and I argued to Chey for personal choice over astrology. This gave him the support he needed to go ahead and marry. It was rocky at first (they lived with her mother), but got smoother as the family got to know Chey, who is an excellent person. One wonderful result of this is the beautiful little girl you see in the attached picture.

Again, thank you Jan. It is fun to write about our project in a more personal way, just as it was good to get to know you and your group. You have such an interesting history. I am sure you will find a good project.

Best regards,
Roger