

Over the past few months all of my newsletters have focused on the bridge building project, as did most of my energy. But other things have still been happening, some of which I've written about below.

## School equipment

Graham Day, a very generous Australian man from the Sunshine Coast, spent a month with me helping out with the bridge. He also came armed with donated school supplies, such as stationery, books and sporting equipment. Unfortunately, the schools here have little or no supplies so all donations are greatly appreciated.



## Land buy back

One family in the village had pawned their land to pay for medical care when the father was ill. This left them with very little land to grow vegetables on. They asked us to buy the land back for them. The cost to buy back their land was only \$62.00 USD (about \$82 Australian). I told them we would happily buy the land back but with conditions attached; that they must use the land productively, that they must not re-pawn it, and that their children attend school. The family has two school age boys who weren't attending school. They agreed to our conditions and the boys now go to school.

## Bicycles



I mentioned this little baby in a previous newsletter. We have now discovered that he has cerebral palsy. The children's hospital in Siem Reap, who diagnosed it, have asked his Mum to bring him in for treatment once a week. The problem was that the village is 20 kms from Siem Reap and his Mum had no transport and could not afford to pay for any. We discussed the problem and she suggested that if she had a bicycle she could ride in to the hospital each week. I was pleased that she came up with the idea herself and that she was obviously keen to do the best she could for her baby, so immediately organised a bicycle for her.

Another family also wanted a bicycle and a water pump. This particular family is extremely poor. The father is deaf and the mother has passed away. They have only a very small piece of land - not enough to grow rice on. There are two older daughters (both married now, so not living at home) and three younger children (aged 10, 7 and 3). One of the older daughters wanted a bicycle so that she could ride into Siem Reap in order to work on the construction sites. The tourism boom in Cambodia means there are many hotels and guest houses being built providing labouring work for many of the villagers. They wanted a water pump as they have no well of their own and had to go elsewhere to collect their daily water.

The boys in this family also weren't attending school, so we made a deal with the them. We said we would buy a bike and put in a water pump, but the conditions were that they must grow vegetables on the small amount of land that they've got and the boys must attend school. The boys were very excited about this idea - they were very keen to attend school.

We had a fun day taking the boys and their big sister shopping for the bike and for school supplies. We bought the boys school uniforms, stationery and a plate and spoon each. The World Food Programme provides a free breakfast at the school each morning and each child has to bring their own plate and spoon.

One difference I've noticed since we put in the water pump is that the children are always much cleaner

whenever we see them now. Before they used to always be covered in dirt.



### **Aussie kids raising money for Cambodian kids**

Over the last few months the children (and staff) of Meridian State College, a new school on the Sunshine Coast in Australia, learnt all about Cambodia and then worked very hard raising money for Prasat Char Village. This all came about as a result of the Head of the Junior School, Robyn Taplin and her husband Mick, visiting Cambodia at Christmas time. The children held a market day at the school where the students from Grades 3 to 6 sold products that they had made to their fellow students.

They raised an amazing \$1,355.00! (Australian dollars.) This will go a *very* long way in the village.

The project has done an incredible job of teaching the children the reality of life in Cambodia. Their understanding of what life here is like for the children is so spot on you'd think they'd been here themselves. I think the money they raised is fantastic, but just as wonderful is the learning and understanding that has obviously occurred.

Robyn sent me some quotes that the children had said. For a grade six child to realize that "*she has the power to change things*" (Taylah) or to "*know that I can make a difference*" (Brae) is very powerful stuff. Just as powerful is a grade four child realising that she has more courage than she thought she had.

With this sort of confidence, power and understanding imagine what these kids will be able to achieve when they're older.

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### **Land mine victim**

A little while ago while visiting the village we were introduced to a young man who had been a victim of a land mine only 11 days previously. The explosion had caused damage to his face and primarily his eyes. The accident took place away from the village at the border of Cambodia and Thailand where he was working on his cousin's farm. His cousin took him to the local hospital and pretty much just left him there. In Cambodia, when you stay in hospital you need a relative or friend to stay with you to provide you with food and buy your medicine, as the hospital doesn't provide these things. Because he had no-one looking after him the hospital sent him to the Siem Reap hospital. At the time the eye doctor was out of the country so the Siem Reap hospital simply sent him back to the village.

Both of his eyes were extremely damaged by the explosion and he couldn't see at all, yet he was sent home without having any consultation whatsoever with an eye doctor! I was horrified when I heard this and we immediately arranged to get him back to the hospital to see an eye surgeon. Obviously I was hoping that with proper treatment he might not end up completely blind. Fortunately, the day we took him to the hospital there were two foreign eye surgeons visiting and they examined him. Unfortunately, they said his eyes were irreparably damaged and he is completely blind. We also spoke to the Red Cross about him and they also followed up (via the Jesuit Service). They ended up organising for him to go to a hospital in Phnom Penh where he underwent surgery, so now he is at least no longer in pain. He will also receive follow up care and will be helped to adjust to being blind.



### **My own visit to an eye clinic**

I have been having problems with one of my eyes so decided to take myself to see the only eye doctor in Siem Reap. He works at the Provincial Hospital, which is an *extremely* basic facility by Western standards. I had phoned the doctor the day before and he told me to turn up at 9.00 am. I thought this meant I had an appointment, but alas, it was just a matter of sitting in the crowded waiting area with all the locals and waiting my turn. The locals found it fascinating that a foreigner was waiting with them and studied me with great interest.

At last it was my turn, and the doctor's assistant wanted me to do an eye test before I went in to see the doctor. This takes place in the crowded waiting room where you have to look at an eye chart and indicate which way the symbols on the chart are pointing. I tried to tell him, through my "right hand man" Mr Chanti, that I didn't need to do an eye test I simply wanted the doctor to examine my eye, but he insisted that it must be done. Now I have extremely bad eyesight, without contact lenses or glasses I can't see a thing. It is so bad that I could barely see the eye chart let alone make out any of the symbols on it. The doctor's assistant had obviously not known of a foreigner with such bad eyesight as it took a huge amount of explaining by Chanti to finally get him to understand that I couldn't see any of the symbols! Meanwhile the locals all watched this exchange with a mixture of amazement and amusement. I find that quite often they assume that we, in the richer countries, don't have any health problems and have magic cures for everything so I think it's very helpful for them to see that this is not the case. (As it turns out I have a calcium build up on my eyelid - apparently no big deal.)

To finish up, I'll leave you with a photo of a sign I saw in a toilet recently.....

