

Newsletter 15 - Our Community Education Center (school)

Newsletter 15 - 4 March 07



It's been a remarkable few months!

IN A VERY SHORT SPACE OF TIME WE HAVE GONE FROM THIS.....



.....TO THIS.

We're Officially Registered - So much has happened that I'm not quite sure where to start. First of all, on 19th February we became officially registered in Cambodia. Our official organisation name is Helping Hands Cambodia and you can now access our website at the following address www.helpinghandscambodia.com The old website name still works as well, basically both names go to the same home page.

School Opening - We officially opened the school on 1st December, 2006 and celebrated with a giant party for all the children. Richard, Linda and Thomas Sherbon from Australia were visiting at the time so they were thrown into the thick of it. Linda was given the job of official photographer, Thomas helped hand out lollies and organise races and Richard, who is a doctor, held a small medical clinic after the official ceremony and saw quite a number of people with various medical complaints (more about that in the next newsletter). After the official speeches and blessing by the monks we turned it into a real party with balloons, lollies, sack races and three legged races, which were new to the children, so created a lot of merriment.



100's of students came to the opening ceremony.



Monks gave a traditional blessing.



Thomas towered above other children his age.



The sack races were a big hit.



Dr Richard examining a young patient.

300 Amazing Students - We were amazed at how many children registered to come to our school. We expected about 150 - instead we had 300 children register. That was three months ago and the numbers haven't dropped off at all.



I've been constantly in awe at how much the children have learnt so far and how eager and enthusiastic they are. Our teacher, Sopeap, is also doing a fabulous job, though I think we may need to help him out by getting another teacher.





Reading Room - Many of the children are so eager that they arrive at school well before the class is due to start so we have set up a reading room. Before we built the school there were basically no books at all in the village, apart from the most basic school books. The children LOVE books and



the reading room is extremely popular. We have one small room dedicated just to books which gets pretty crowded so the children also sit outside on mats and read. Just a couple of days ago we received a very generous donation of 200 books from the Asia Foundation.

Water Filters - We are teaching the children the importance of drinking clean water and have provided 9 water filters in the school. Each child has their own cup with their name on it and they love the clean water.



Chanti and I transporting the 300 cups to the village.



The older girls preparing the water filters.



Enjoying healthy, clean water.

Adult Classes - We started our adult classes about two weeks ago. Our teacher, Chunton, has had four years experience teaching adult literacy, numeracy and life skills. He teaches three evenings a week. Our first class attracted 4 students - two weeks later the number is up to 20, but we expect this to grow as the adults become less shy. We know there are people who are interested in attending but are scared or intimidated because of the fact that they have never had any schooling. I've asked Chanti to try and get them to understand that the classes are for people exactly like them. Our students in the adult classes range from 13 to 24 years old. Some attended school for one or two years but then had to stop because of poverty. I've been very surprised at some of the people turning up to our adult classes. There are several that have come from households that in the past we've found difficult to work with as we couldn't seem to find ways to get them to help themselves, they seemed unmotivated. So I've been very encouraged to see them eagerly attending our adult literacy classes.

Many Visitors - So far this year we've already had many foreigners come to visit and volunteer to spend an afternoon or two at our school. Briony, Chris, Tony and Melitta were our very first official volunteers at the school. Peter from Eumundi spent a number of days out at the school doing craft activities with the children. Peter was also very good at "roping" in other travellers to come and help out. Another group from the Sunshine Coast (Peter, Athena, Brian, Theo, David, Karyn, Narelle, Colin, Tom and Robert) spent an afternoon playing games and putting on a puppet show at the school. They also donated a television, DVD player and generator so now we can play educational DVD's. So thanks to everyone who has come out and spent an afternoon volunteering at the school - you've no idea how much the kids appreciate and enjoy it.





School Bags - There are lovely group of ladies in Australia who are making school bags for our children. The vast majority of children don't have any bag to bring their books to school. Some have plastic bags and a lucky few have real bags. We are giving the bags that the ladies make to the students as rewards for working hard. Once a week the teacher selects 20 students who have been trying their hardest and they are presented with a new bag - they are all extremely proud when they get chosen. Eventually, every child will get a bag.



School Vegetable Garden - At the school we have a vegetable garden and fruit trees which the children look after. The children have built a fence right around the school to keep cows out of the garden. They built the fence themselves with sticks that they bought from home. Peter taught them about using manure and hay to promote growth and again the children all bought "donations" from home.



A Final Word - I was showing some visitors around the village recently (after an afternoon of fun and games) and a small band of children were accompanying us. Three little girls were fighting over who was going to hold my hands. Suddenly, one of the little girls looked up at me and said (in Cambodian) "the school is good" with a big grin on her face while giving me the thumbs up. What better validation could you ask for!

