

Newsletter 7

Hello again,

Today I'd like to tell you about a place called the Land Mine Museum and about an art exhibition that will be taking place in Toowoomba in November. Before I left Australia I met a man called Damien Kamholtz who works in the field of art therapy with children that have suffered trauma. He said that he was going to be holding an exhibition of children's artwork in November and I told him that I was sure I'd be able to gather artwork from Cambodian children to contribute to the exhibition.



Over the six months that I've been here I have had lots of fun creating and collecting artwork from children at the orphanage, the village and from the Land Mine Museum. Its the Land Mine Museum that I'd like to focus on in this newsletter.....

Cambodia still has an extremely bad problem with landmines. It is estimated that there are still five million land mines. One out of every 278 people are land mine victims. It is one of the worst landmine affected countries in the world due to almost three decades of conflict. Every single day another person becomes a victim of landmines – often these victims are poor children in remote villages.

An amazing man called Aki Ra opened the Landmine Museum in 1999. As a former child soldier of both the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Army, he was forced to lay landmines. (There is a link at the bottom of this page that will take you to the story of Aki Ra's life.)



Aki Ra now travels the country training farmers how to safely remove landmines and helping people who are victims. He has cleared thousands of mines – all of which are on display at his museum. He does all this with very basic equipment, i.e. one method of clearing a mine involves blowing it up using little more than a water bottle, string and a couple of sticks.

The Landmine Museum is currently home to about 20 children, most of them are landmine or UXO (unexploded ordinance) victims, some of them are orphans. Each child has his/her own story to tell. The Museum provides the children with financial support that enables them to attend school and eat properly. Volunteer English teachers provide the children with English lessons at the museum. Most of the children would not be able to attend school if they remained in their own villages. Some of the children had never attended school before they came to live at the Landmine Museum .



Aki Ra and his family, with the help of volunteers, have been able to provide a happy home for the children who may have otherwise been left to live a life of begging on the streets or working at home and not attending school. Akira and the Land Mine Museum receive no government support and are funded purely by donations.



In each situation I didn't tell the children what I wanted them to draw. I just let them do whatever they wished. Almost all of the pictures from the children of the Landmine Museum featured landmines. Maybe its not just because they have been victims of them. Perhaps they thought that I expected them to draw mines or perhaps its because of the environment they live in. They are surrounded by landmines day in day out. Nonetheless, they seem to be a very happy group of children.

Given the opportunity, most children preferred to copy a picture out of a book. Creativity isn't necessarily free flowing in Cambodia and has to be really encouraged. I think this is why the children's pictures often look similar to one another. I wonder if this is a result of the ravages of the Khmer Rouge regime where any citizen who was educated or involved in arts, culture, etc, was killed. Very few of the creative people survived.



In each situation the children were very enthusiastic when I told them that I was going to be showing their artwork to people in Australia.

I only really had two "problems" during the gathering of this artwork. Both of them were at the Landmine Museum. The first problem was with Sok – the resident baby monkey. He would run amok and cause no end of havoc while the children were trying to draw or paint their pictures. We were constantly chasing him to try and get back pencils, erasers and anything else he took it into his head to take. Then he developed a liking to the actual paint and would jump on the table and scoop up handfuls of it to eat! (I tried getting him to paint a picture but gave up rather quickly.)



The other "challenge" occurred one day when one of the children decided he would rather paint Sok's face than his paper. He then decided to paint his own face. Before long everyone had got into the act and I threw my hands up in frustration. By the time the session was over everyone, including the volunteers and myself, had been painted. "Oh well", I thought "art is all about self expression and face painting is as good a way as any to express yourself."



SORI - Born in 1993

You can't help but be charmed by Sori. He is one of the happiest kids I've ever met. And he just loves posing for the camera.

Sori is one of six children and comes from a poor family in the town of Samroang . He was born without either of his lower arms, but has never been given a medical explanation as to why.



Sori has been told that before he was born, a close friend of the family was captured by the Khmer Rouge, had his arms tied behind his back and was executed. When Sori was born years later they discovered at the time of delivery that his arms were tied behind his back with string, in

the same way as the executed friend. Sori's mother took this as a sign of the dead and believed that Sori's missing forearms were caused by Sori himself.

The next day, Sori's mother took him into the jungle and left him there. Fortunately, Sori's father confronted her, forcing her to confess what had happened and Sori was soon found. Soon after this, Sori's father took his own life, leaving Sori's mother to look after the family.

In 2003 staff from CMAC were clearing mines from the area near where Sori lived. At the time he was working in a field and not attending school. CMAC told Sori's mother that Aki Ra would give Sori a home and an education. Sori came to the museum in late 2003.

Sori's mother has since become very ill and when he can, Sori makes the one day journey in the back of a truck to visit her. Sori's mother loves him very much.

When asked about his future, Sori says with a big smile that he would like to teach children. He enjoys football, school, ice cream and playing in the river. Sori has a smile that is contagious and a cheeky sense of humour.

CHET - Born in 1985 (*? I'm not sure if this is correct, I think he's actually about 16.*)

I rather hesitantly gave Chet my camera one day and told him to "snap away". I thought it would be interesting to get his perspective in the photos rather than mine for a change. Not only did he love it, but he also took some great photos. Chet acts all tough, but he's really a lovely kid.



Chet was born into a farming community and his accident happened when he was gathering rice one day for his grandfather. His grandfather was so close at the time that he heard the explosion and came running. Chet lost his leg. He was ten years old.

Both Chet's parents died soon after this, his mother through illness and his father to a landmine. After his parent's deaths, Chet ran away to Phnom Penh where he began a life on the streets, begging and shining shoes to survive.

When he couldn't earn enough money for food, Chet turned to theft, which got him into trouble. His friends on the streets also got him involved in sniffing toxic glue, a common pastime for Cambodian street kids.

Chet met Aki Ra two years ago when he begged from him one day in the city. Aki Ra took him to the Landmine Museum to give Chet a home and education.

Unfortunately, because Chet has lived so long on the streets he ran away back to Phnom Penh a few times while trying to settle down at the Land Mine Museum, but Chet always returns.

Chet has realized the importance of education and now goes to school. He studies English and does his best to interact with visitors to the museum and volunteer teachers.

Chet is lively and likes nothing better than a good practical joke. His nature is cheeky and he beats his disability with a hilarious sense of humour. Chet has said he would love to do similar work as Aki Ra when he gets older.



BOREAK - Born 1993

Boreak is a real livewire. He loves to do rap and also loves boxing.

Boreak comes from Chon Kal and is the sixth of eight children (2boys, 6 girls).

Boreak's father was a soldier with the Cambodian Army and had collected explosives and weapons which he took home with him. When Boreak was eight years old, he was in his family's yard trying to kill a chicken for dinner. To kill the chicken he used the detonator from an unexploded bomb his father had collected. As Boreak went to throw the detonator, he drew his hand back and in the process dislodged the safety pin, exploding the detonator in his hand.

The initial blast took off his fingers, hand bones and left some fragments of metal under his eyebrow which remain there to this day. Boreak was taken to an army doctor who was inexperienced and had never operated before. The doctor administered medicine to Boreak's wound incorrectly which killed off the muscles in his hand.

After one day the doctor removed the hand and wrist, but again administered the same medicine on the wound. A few weeks later Boreak's arm was removed up to his elbow. The second operation left some arm bone close to the skin and so a third operation was needed to correct this, removing more of the arm.

Boreak came to the museum in April 2004. In the short time he has been here, he has come to call the museum home and Aki Ra and Hourt parents. When he gets older, Boreak would like to be a doctor with a wife and two children.

Also, Boreak has become known to the other boys as the one who can talk the ears off an elephant!

Landmine Casualties - CAMBODIA

Cambodia still has an extremely bad problem with landmines. It is estimated that there are still five million land mines. One out of every 278 people are land mine victims. It is one of the worst landmine affected countries in the world due to almost three decades of conflict. Every single day another person becomes a victim of landmines – often these victims are poor children in remote villages.





Cambodia is one of the worst landmine and UXO affected countries in the world due to almost three decades of conflict. In 2003, 97% of casualties were civilian. Most mine incidents are associated with livelihood activities being undertaken in forests and fields.

The vast majority of mine casualties were engaged in daily livelihood activities such as farming, herding, clearing new land, fishing and collecting food and wood (51%) or traveling (31%), at the time of the incident; whereas 63% of the UXO casualties were caused by tampering.

According to the 'Cambodia Landmine Monitor Report for 2004', in 2003, a total of 41.7 million square meters of land was cleared, including 60,626 antipersonnel mines, 1,096 anti-vehicle mines and 118,307 UXO. This was 20 percent more land cleared than in 2002, and the largest annual total ever.



In 2003, 772 new landmine and UXO (unexploded ordinance) casualties were reported in Cambodia, including 115 killed and 657 injured. In the first six months of 2004, there were 671 new mine/UXO casualties recorded, showing the first upward trend in many years.

Since 1999, 5,128 new mine/UXO casualties have been recorded in Cambodia.



The mine/UXO casualty rate declined from 12 new casualties a day in 1996 to three a day in 1999 and to an average of two casualties a day in 2003, a rate that has remained constant since 2000. However, in the first eight months of 2004 the rate increased again to an average of almost three casualties a day.

Every hour, somewhere in the world, landmines and unexploded ordinance claim two new casualties.

INDISCRIMINATE:

- ⇒ Land mines cannot be aimed: they do not distinguish between the footfall of a soldier or a child.
- ⇒ They lie dormant until a person or animal triggers their detonating mechanism. Then, landmines kill or injure civilians, soldiers, peacekeepers and aid workers alike.

INHUMANE

- ⇒ When triggered, a landmine unleashes unspeakable destruction.
- ⇒ A landmine blast causes injuries like blindness, burns, destroyed limbs and shrapnel wounds.
- ⇒ Sometimes the victim dies from the blast due to loss of blood or because they don't get to medical care in time.
- ⇒ Those who survive and receive medical treatment often require amputations, long hospital stays and extensive rehabilitation.
- ⇒ The injuries are no accident, since landmines are designed to maim rather than kill their victims.

THE MINE BAN TREATY

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) is a network of more than 1,400 non-government organizations in 90 countries working for a global ban on landmines. www.icbl.org

The Mine Ban Treaty is the international agreement that bans antipersonnel landmines. Sometimes referred to as the Ottawa Convention, it is officially titled: the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Antipersonal Mines and on their Destruction.

The treaty is the most comprehensive international instrument for ridding the world of the scourge of mines and deals with everything from mine use, production and trade, to victim assistance, mine clearance and stockpile destruction.

In December 1997 a total of 122 governments signed the treaty in Ottawa, Canada. In September the following year, Burkina Faso was the 40th country to ratify. Consequently, in March 1999 the treaty became binding under international law, and did so more quickly than any treaty of its kind in history. Today, the treaty is still open for ratification by signatories and for accession by those that did not sign before March, 1999.

⇒ Australia HAS signed the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty.

⇒ The following countries HAVE NOT: Armenia, America, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bhutan, Burma, China, Cuba, Egypt, Finland, Georgia, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Kazakhstan, Korea North, Korea South, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lao PDR, Latvia, Lebanon, Libya, Micronesia, Mongolia, Morocco, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Palau, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tonga, Tuvalu, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vietnam.

⇒ THE FOLLOWING IS A LIST OF COUNTRIES THAT HAVE PRODUCED LANDMINES SINCE 2002. America, Cuba, Egypt, Iraq, Singapore, North Korea, South Korea, Nepal, Russia, China, Iran, Vietnam, Pakistan, India and Burma.