

Sunday LIFE



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FIJIAN FRIENDSHIP - Clint Miller is passionate about Fiji and giving tourists a true cultural experience. P22



Focus on humanity

A Coast photographer has put herself into the picture to help poor Cambodians

CHARITABLE SOUL: Deborah Groves – photographer, independant aid worker and founder of Helping Hands in Cambodia – with a photograph of the man who inspired her.

PHOTO: KARI BOURNE/KB162462H

By JANINE HILL

DEBORAH Groves wondered where last year went until she sat down and made a list which went: "Built bridge, built school..."

And that was just for starters.

Deborah is not a builder or an engineer but a photographer, who put her business on the Sunshine Coast on hold to do something that she considered more important.

Since 2005, she has based herself in Cambodia, where she helps residents of a small, poverty-stricken village using funds raised

by a growing network of supporters in Australia and overseas.

Her first year was dedicated to helping the villagers with the basics, starting with medical attention for the sick, and improved shelter for those living in sub-standard houses, then extending to the provision of basic tools and livestock so that they could grow their own food.

But watching locals do a balancing act over a "bridge" that was barely more than just a few planks, every time they came and went from the village, prompted her most ambitious project: building a new

bridge. "It was a bit of a risk to take. I started building the bridge before I had all the money for it but I had no choice. The bridge that was there was just about collapsed and if we'd waited, we wouldn't have had enough time to do it before the wet season," she said.

The bridge was built but it became very much a family effort with Deborah's sister and brother-in-law chipping in \$3500 – the profit on a car that Deborah's father sold for them.

Just after the bridge was finished in July, Deborah oversaw construction of a school, or more correctly, a community education centre, for the village, Prasat Char, about 250km north-west of capital Phnom Penh.

The timber, iron and palm-leaf panelled building, which cost about \$4000 to build, is used to teach the village children – even those who do not have the opportunity to go to the local school – English.

The villagers have responded to the help given to them.

About 260 children were registered to attend the centre but the number had grown to 300 by the time

Deborah left to spend Christmas with her family at Currimundi.

The enrolment is not bad considering that it is only open in the afternoons when the lone teacher rotates through about five classes and such has been the growth that Deborah hopes to hire a second teacher when she returns to Cambodia later this month.

"It's interesting. The people over there seem to appreciate the value of education. The kids WANT to go to school, yet you know how kids here don't..." she said.

The education centre fits in with Deborah's agenda of empowering the locals to improve their own lot in life.

"We're not about hand-outs. We want people to be able to help themselves," she said.

The villagers built the school and, in return for their labour, earned bikes, a valued form of transport to the nearest other villages.

They even cleared the site to build the school by hand.

"It was raining, there was mud. There were great big scorpions. They fished out two while I was there," Deborah said.

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CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: Villagers did earthworks by hand to prepare the site for the new school; the new school under construction; children attend class in the new centre; charity worker Deborah Groves hopes every family in the village will have a bicycle by the end of the year. PHOTOS: DEBORAH GROVES

