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# KHMER NEW YEAR

The year past by so quickly, we were very honored to celebrate Khmer New Year in Cambodia. It is one of the essential festivals for all. It is not only a time for the family gathering and trips but also the special day for reviewing our traditional custom, dancing, song, especially traditional games.



During this occasion, people travel from Phnom Penh to visit their relative in their hometowns or plan a trip to visit Siem Reap, Sihanouk Ville, Rotanakiri, etc.



This year we have a special national celebration in Siem Reap – Angkor Wat. This is our first time that we produced the biggest Ansom (two-tonnes kilograms) (a kind of Cambodian traditional cake which is made by sticky rice, bean and a piece of bacon) its size is 5 meters by 1 meters. A various kind of traditional games have been played.



We wish you a Happy New Year from Cambodia.

# CAMBODIA – MY SECOND COUNTRY

By Donna Zahra from Australia

My name is Donna Zahra, I'm 29 years old and I come from Melbourne, Australia. I graduated from university in 2005 and for the past 8 years I have been working as a Registered Nurse in both public and private sectors. Volunteering in a third world country was something I had always wanted to do ever since I was in high school where I learnt that volunteering overseas was a possibility.

After years of working and saving up money while chasing the so called Australian Dream I decided that the timing was finally right to jet off to what ended up being the most amazing and incredible life-changing experience of my life.

My plane landed in Cambodia on Monday February 10<sup>th</sup> 2014 and for the next two months I called Phnom Penh my home. I had signed up to do a care project and for eight weeks I worked at the Salvation Care Centre (SCC) which is a local non-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO). The organization was founded to respond to the urgent need of Cambodian people for education, care and support relating to HIV/AIDS.



On my care placement, I helped assist the teaching staff with the day-to-day running of the centre. Every day I taught and played with both the older children (10 to 15 years old)

and the younger children (3 to 6 years old). Along with teaching English, I would also get the students to play interactive learning games such as Bingo and Hangman, as well as participate in arts and crafts projects that I would prepare. You basically have the freedom to come up with games and activities that you think will be fun and beneficial to the children. I



also was fortunate enough to purchase for SCC a CD/iPod Player and a set of speakers with money donated by my grandmother. This proved to be a wonderful gift for the children as they all loved the days we listen to music and they also in particular really loved to dance. Often they would try to teach me the dance moves to PSY “Gangnam Style” and “Gentleman” as well as how to dance in their traditional Khmer style.

I would get to the Center at 8:00am from Monday to Friday. I worked till 10:30am and then we would break for lunch which was eaten with the other volunteers back at the apartments. I would return to work at 2:00pm and finish at 4:00pm. It was very important that you showed initiative and enthusiasm and immersed yourself into your placement and that you spent your time productively as time there goes by so quickly especially when you’re having the time of your life.

During my placement at SCC myself and some other volunteers also decided to implement simple hygiene practices, such as washing hands and brushing teeth into the daily practice of the centre. It was a shock to see just how many of the children at SCC had black rotting and decaying teeth. Oral hygiene sadly is not so commonly practiced in the slums where I worked and there exists no education on the importance of oral hygiene. Together



with the help of several volunteers and Projects Abroad we helped to better the situation by providing a care package consisting of a toothbrush and face-washer for every child there (all 120 of them) and with the extras provisions of toothpaste and hand soap we managed to implement the washing of hands, face and brushing of teeth into the school curriculum so that every day we would get the children to practice these few basic hygiene functions.

Sadly quite a lot of the children at SCC are covered in head lice as well. So another practice myself and some other volunteers implemented was to treat their hair for head lice every 2 to 3 weeks. This proved to be a little trickier as most of the children go home to sleep on the one mattress that they share with their whole family, who are also infected with lice and so the lice did prove to be too viscous a cycle for us to fully break but I did feel that we managed to decrease the amount of lice and that still counts for something.

The best advice I could give the other volunteers would be to not let fear and self-doubt hold you back from fully immersing yourself into the culture and traditions and life that is Cambodia otherwise you’ll miss out on so much the country and Khmer people have to offer. Every day is an opportunity to witness something magical and life-changing. My time in Cambodia was so amazing. I made sure every day was special and memorable. I made so many amazing friends not only with the other volunteers but also with the teaching staff at

SCC and the local Khmer people who lived in the slums around SCC. Don't be afraid to introduce yourself to the locals. If you allow yourself to be open with them they will be only too happy and eager to let you into their lives and pretty soon not only will you be good friends but you might even be finding yourself sitting in their houses drinking beer and sharing some very strange local Khmer food such as fried bugs, fish heads and chicken feet (as was the case with me).

I feel so honored and blessed to have been able to have the experience I did in Cambodia. The kindred spirits of the children in SCC touched my hearts deeply. Their constant need for show of affection is unwavering and I have never felt so loved in my life nor have I ever been as lavished with hugs and kisses as I was there at SCC. When compared to us western volunteers these children and their families have nothing. They live in such extreme poverty, squalor and destitution yet their happiness, passion and unfaltering smiles and laughter is overwhelming and contagious. My two months in Cambodia was such a humbling and deeply moving experience, and all I can say is that I have been very blessed to have had this experience. I could write pages and pages on all the amazing adventures I've had there as there are just too many stories to tell and not enough time or space. So you will just have to settle for taking my word for it and hopefully one day you to will get to go to Cambodia and experience firsthand all that the country has to offer.



## **A REPORT FROM JAYDEN B. – CARE VOLUNTEER**

Cambodia is unique and with a tragedy, suffered only 35 years ago, has defined the entire history and shaped this country's culture. In the 21st century, it is an exciting country driven to prove itself as a dominant economy in South East Asia (Chandler, 2008).

A fundamental cause of the poor health in Cambodia is limited education. Providing individuals with information on hand washing, safe sex and the medical services available; empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their health, and helps in the prevent

When only traveling through developing countries, many of these issues may be hidden. By immersing yourself into the culture and lifestyle of the locals the harsh realities become noticeable. Each of these health and development issues were present during our time at placements in Cambodia.

### **Expectations –Jayden Bregu from Australia**

Before the placement I was both nervous and excited. My past overseas experience and the pre-departure research paper formed the basis of a number of expectations. Was one month really going to be enough to impact those whom I come into contact with? Many individuals who worked abroad believe that they can change the world, and have an effect on the whole country (Mill, 2006). I was more worried about whether or not I would make any impact at all. I also had this expectation that I would get infinitely more out of the experience than those I was there to help, and if this were to be so, would I be able to bring back what I had learnt to make a difference to those at home.

### **Expectations – Rebekah Dashwood from Australia**

Prior to arriving in Cambodia, I was given an overview of the Khemara Organization, and the activities I would be involved in. This information shaped my expectations of the initial days at work. I imagined that I would be first able to observe how the centre operated before incorporating my own ideas. This would ensure that I would not impose my own views and values. I knew there would be a language barrier between the children and myself; however I believed I could use the teachers as a means of communicating ideas and lessons to the children.

### **Placement**

The Khemara Organization was established in 1991 (Khemara, 2012). Since then it has promoted a number of initiatives, including those to eradicate child abuse and neglect. By providing a place for children to be while their parents are working, the centre reduces the number of children left fending for themselves, and offers an opportunity for the safe interaction with other children.

The organization operates nine of these centers situated throughout Phnom Penh. We were assigned to PhsarLer, a brand new centre fully funded by Projects Abroad. The centre was less than one month old, the teachers had only held their position for the same amount of time, and it was the children's first time in day care. We were the first volunteers to assist at this centre and the first "Westerners" the children had ever had contact with.

Our role at the center was to assist the teachers in caring for and teaching the children. As the centre was new, we were given the opportunity to contribute ideas in the development of a daily schedule. In the beginning the schedule included playing, teaching basic English (such as ABC's, counting and children's songs), lunch, naptime and "washing" time. Our input into this schedule included brushing teeth, hand washing, coloring, and other

activities. Almost instantly, we were in charge of the daily running of the PhsarLer. This gave the teachers a much needed opportunity to learn and complete administrative work vital for the upkeep of the centre. Being in charge of 45 children, between the ages of 2 and 7 years old, was no easy task, but one we adapted too quickly.

The Khemara Organization organized doctors' visits every fortnight. Just like in Australia, there is a great respect for the medical profession. During the visits, the children would sit patiently, watch and wait for their check-up. The doctor would prescribe a number of vitamins and in some cases antibiotics for the children.

### **Promoting Healthy Habits**

A large proportion of the children at PhsarLer had rotten and blackened teeth. It was always a plan of mine to introduce compulsory teeth brushing, but after seeing this, the idea was fast-tracked. After organizing toothbrushes and toothpaste and handing them out to the children it became evident that they already knew how to brush their teeth although it looked as though they had not done it before.

This particular part of our placement was a complete success; the children quickly adopted the practice as a part of their regular routine and many had begun lining up before I was ready to begin handing the tooth brushes out. After mentioning the success of this initiative to other volunteers, they were very quick in applying it into their own centres and before Rebekah and I left, it was a compulsory part of the day in almost all of Khemara.

The success of the previous initiative, prompted me to introduce a hand washing policy. Cambodia is severely affected by a lack of safe, running water and as a result that water is kept for seemingly more important things. Like most children their age, although there is a spoon available, on many occasions using their hands was more fun. Rebekah and I were happy that we were able to teach the children how to rinse their hands, but of course improvements needed to be made.

More than an initiative, I implemented a correct disposal policy. Whenever a child dropped any form of rubbish, I would assist them in picking it up and taking it to the bin. During the first week of my arrival, the children would simply drop rubbish on the ground. There didn't seem to be any thought behind it, and it was possibly the same action they would take at home. The number of vermin and insects present was not unusual and the children were not scared or shocked. Although, their behavior never completely changed, and most children would just drop the rubbish outside the classroom rather than inside, I did notice a change. Everyone became aware of when they were dropping their rubbish. I could see many children looking at me to ensure that I did not see them drop it.

### **Expectations Revisited**

As previously mentioned, I had two substantial expectations that I believe altered my experience in Cambodia. The first, my worry that I would be unable to make any affect to the

lives of those I was there to help, has already been answered throughout this paper. I am extremely proud of myself and Rebekah.

My second expectation was one that I believed held true. I feel as though I did get infinitely more out of the experience than the children I was there to help. For a number of weeks after my return, I was shocked by how much the phenomenon, reverse culture shock, affected me (Gaw, 2000). Every decision I made while on placement had a life altering consequence whether that be for myself or for the children. I was learning and teaching everyday. In returning to "normal" life, I hope to continue this trend and continuously make improvements to the lives around me.

### **Individual Experience – Rebekah**

Projects Abroad and the Khemara Organisation are in the process of initiating individual developmental profiles for each child. The profiles will include milestones for motor, cognitive and emotional development. I was fortunate enough to be involved in the creation of these profiles, suggesting what should and should not be included. I felt very passionately about these profiles, as I could see their value for both volunteers and the Khemara Organisation.

These profiles are also an important resource for the Khemara Organisation. Not having access to data similar to this previously, the organisation was unable to determine what progress the centres had made. The profiles will be a continuous record, allowing effective distribution of teachers and resources, and the quick resolution of issues that may arise

*A meeting to discuss the development profiles of all Khemara students*



The one month we had in Cambodia challenged us physically and emotionally. Our expectations and values were altered throughout our experience, and the way we approached certain issues changed as we developed in knowledge, skill and teamwork. Many of the issues we faced are not limited to Cambodia and can be found throughout the developing world, and on reflection, globally.

Cambodia's recent culture was extremely confronting. Although we had previous knowledge, it was not until we immersed ourselves in the culture and formed connections with the local people that we gained a better understanding of their histories impact, and



the need to be culturally sensitive. Our approach to making a difference was much more realistic than that of many other volunteers. It was because of this attitude and our extensive preparation that we believe the contributions we made will have a lasting impact on the lives of the children at Phsar Ler. Undoubtedly, there is always more to be done. With future contributions from volunteers, Phsar Ler can continue to develop and improve.

Experiences like this are what form us and prepare us for a future as health professionals. It will always be a resource that we draw on as we work to improve the lives of those around us.



*Our Final Day at Phsar Ler Daycare Centre*

## STAFF UPDATE



Sophan has decided to resign from Projects Abroad Cambodia after working for Projects Abroad for 8 year. He was our Care coordinator and had been promoted to Volunteer Manager in 2012. We are all very sad for his leaving but we respect his

decision. We are all at Projects Abroad would like to thank him so much for his great work and dedication toward our organization, volunteers and staff.

We sincerely wish him to enjoy the next step of his life and challenges.

# UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCE

**By Toni Lee from Sweden**

I've left Siem Reap and Cambodia now. If you're up to date with what I'm doing you know that I've been a volunteer in Siem Reap for two months. I taught mainly English mainly at a primary school but I also had a little bit of Chinese to teach to some children in the neighborhood.

Before my trip I thought I would go to Cambodia, do some volunteering and maybe help the community, have a short holiday after that and then move on. In a way it's been like that, but I got so much more than that. The people I met affected me, the children, the volunteers and people that I worked with.

I miss them more than I thought I would.

Somehow they succeeded to sneak under my radar and touch me. Everywhere I go now I see them in other people. I walk by a man on the street and think he reminds me of him. I see a girl sitting in a café and is about to call out her name when I realize that it cannot be the person I'm thinking about. When I see children in school uniforms I expect them to notice me, smile their adorable little smiles and say "Hello, teacher!" but it's not one of the children I teach. Correction, taught.

I'm thinking to myself, how did they do it? Because most of the time it was hard to communicate with them, especially the children. They don't speak much English and most of the local people I spent time with didn't speak much English either. I don't speak a lot of khmer and when I try to, the pronunciation is off so they just laugh. It's a special connection you build with people when you don't speak the same language not even that, it's enough not to speak the same mother tongue. When you overcome the language barrier and you both understand each other or just having a good time. It's almost like magic. I



think that it also means that we're not that different from other people in our core. No matter where we come from.

It's time for me to move on. A part of me don't want to, it just wants to head back to Siem Reap and tell everybody that he's going to stay forever. He is scared that he will forget them or that they will forget him. There is a reason it's hard to move on as they mean so much to me. I had to leave sooner or later; there is never a perfect time. So, here I am trying to let go and move on, but I will never forget.

## DIRTY WEEKEND



At VCAO, a placement where provide Basic English and care to children. In March, our volunteer and staff cleaned the center and donate 24 pillows to VCAO for children having naps and painted the classroom dividers. There were not a lot of volunteers to come as they got their own plan. Still, we had a great time for doing Dirty Weekend.

We thank Lora Martin and her daughter Tayla, Trine Kloster and Isabella Calder for their contribution.

## PHOTO OF THE MONTH



Tegan instructing her students how to do home work.



Carlo having lunch with his local teacher at placement.