

Free education for children in rural Cambodia

# SAVONG SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

Savong School Newsletter: Number 10: September 2011



## The brightest and the best - 2011



**Examinations were held this month and five students shone brightest. They win scholarships—first to complete Grade 12, and then to proceed to University.**

One of the highlights of the calendar at Savong School is the end of term examination in August. Last year four students scored high marks and had also completed Grade 12 at High School, and we awarded them full university scholarships which last until they graduate.

This year the top students scored high marks but each needs to complete high school in order to be admitted to University. Savong is committed to seeing these students reach their potential so we are adjusting the Scholarship arrangement for this group so that we sponsor them (new bicycle, and \$25 a month) to complete High School and then, after that, we will put them on the full University scholarship including enrolment, laptop and transport as required into Siem Reap.

Another four students came close and they each win prizes in recognition of their achievements. We'll keep an eye on this group.

The scholarship programme is an important and very successful facet of Savong's School which has the mission of helping poor rural students in the district to overcome barriers and reach their potential. One benefit is the huge motivation it gives to students - the scholarships are highly valued.

The scholarships also come with some responsibility. These scholarship students will be expected to contribute back to the school— for example by coaching other younger students at Savong's School.

## Letter from Duncan.



This edition of the newsletter marks a couple of subtle shifts. First, in the masthead we incorporate the logo of the Savong Foundation. The significance of this ought to be explained.

Savong's projects in Cambodia—the school, the SOC, the medical center and the Student Centre in town, continue to be funded by supporters world-wide.

Historically there have been two channels via which funds could be directed to Savong's School. The first was simple, direct gifting to Savong in Cambodia.

The second has been via a registered charity that I set up in my home here in New Zealand. This charity is the Cambodian Rural Schools Trust, and as a registered charity it is subject to all the Inland Revenue reporting requirements that are standard in New Zealand. This is one reason why we needed to set up—as we have—an accounting system for all expenditures undertaken by Savong in Cambodia. Money needs to be trackable and accountable.

The PayPal funds that come via the [www.savong.com](http://www.savong.com) website are directed through this Charity, and receipted.

This last year a third avenue has opened up thanks to the dedication, patience and financial investment of Phil Caldwell in California who set up the Savong Foundation as a 501 registered charity in the USA. The significance of this is particularly important for American supporters who can now direct money to the activities in Cambodia, but tax-effectively via the Foundation.

A few people have asked me how does this all fit in? Are we competing in some way? Not at all. Both the NZ and the US-based charities are devoted to funding, guiding and supporting the school, the SOC, the medical center and student centre in town. Phil, and the Foundation's Board of Directors are committed to running things (as I am) in an efficient manner without overheads. We also swap notes, exchange emails, have Skype calls and talk shop. We are both committed to helping the people—especially the young people—of Bakong, which is the home of Savong's school.

The second subtle change is in my own life.

I've been trying to squeeze in the commitments of the project alongside the demands of my own little business, and during the last 18 months have been under increasing pressure.

Something had to give. So this month I took up a full time position with a larger research firm and they—very graciously—have allowed me to work a four day week, while on Fridays (in theory) I'll have time to do what I do with Savong's projects. Each week there is a lot of correspondence with volunteers, supporters, sponsors and Savong so you may notice from now that my emails and answers will occur on Fridays and weekends. Please forgive me if you send something on a Monday and I take a few days to get back.

Meanwhile in Cambodia so many aspects of the project are going really well. I'm just off the phone from Savong—he and the children are at West Baray lake, enjoying chicken, as well as eggs and fresh vegetables for lunch—and much of this produce (the eggs, the vegetables and the bags full of papaya) have come off the farm established to provide food for the SOC children.

At the school, amidst all the exams, Sopheak has been promoted to the position of Director—which is acknowledgement by Savong that he needs to delegate! - and the teachers have been more involved in the day to day running and decision-making at the school. These are the signs of a maturing organization.

A small group of older children from SOC are now attending a western style school in town in order to accelerate their education, and if you remember Seyha who 12 months ago was running off the rails in teenage fashion—well, he's soon to begin IT studies at University and we look forward to seeing his progress. He's very serious about making a real effort to succeed and it will be enjoyable to see how he progresses.

With the Health Center open once more, the programme, (Savong's dream if you like), is back in full flight. A lot of great work is being done.



## Child profile— Little Nuon



Veourn Sinoun, or Little Nuon was an infant child when he first came to the SOC. His mother used to pick fruit in Thailand - and was extremely poor. Today she is employed as the cook at the SOC but Nuon runs around like he's everyone's little brother. Lately he's been growing up—getting more involved in group play with other younger children, and getting a little taller too. When I first met him in 2009 he didn't seem to be so happy— he finds the hottest months uncomfortably hot, but this April/May he was running around happily, laughing a lot, and really loving to play with a set of blocks that had been donated. The photo on the left captures his temperament really well—exuberant, inquisitive and full of energy.

Last month we had two pieces of good news for Nuon. First, he has a sponsor, (that occurred almost exactly on his recorded birthday of August 5th) and second, now he is 5 he is now enrolled for school. So after Pchum Ben festival he will commence at the local Bakong Primary school. He will be one of 23 children from SOC attending school—so he will have help from "bigger brothers and sisters" when he makes those first steps into the education system.

# News briefs from Savong's projects

A few of the recent happenings at the school, the SOC and the medical center



**The medical center** is up and running again after a few months respite. Dr Sokunthea had to stop working a few months ago in order to look after her husband who was suffering cancer. He didn't make it, and we offer Dr Sokunthea our condolences. Meanwhile a new doctor has started, and already the practice is seeing many patients each day. Registration of the center has been completed and we have begun to run some stories in the medical press to raise awareness from those in the medical profession who may wish to volunteer.

**New tables, new roofing.** At the SOC recent visitors have contributed new tables for the dining room and the children are now feasting without sitting on the floor. One benefit if you've ever sat on the floor: those ants can be pretty nippy! Meanwhile new roofing has been provided over the kitchen and dining room - tin roofing— to make the space more weather tight. Tin roofing can get hot, but the local trick has been adopted: covering the red roof with thatching to keep the sun off.



**Savong is learning to delegate!** At the school he has promoted Sopheak to the role of school director, and teachers and Sopheak make the management decisions together. One teacher, Neang, who teaches Japanese, has been unable to give time to teaching for a few weeks due to family reasons, and he was worried that he would not be paid. (Such punitive practices are not uncommon in employer/employee relationships in Cambodia.) In fact we have a policy of continuing to pay teachers who are unable to work for reasons of health, bereavement or family hardships and Savong was pleased to tell Neang this. (Actually Neang cried when he was told.) One of the foundations of our employment policy is to give all staff a sense of assurance. This month is Pchum Ben festival—one of the two big festivals of the year—and each year we give an envelope to each teacher with a financial gift as a mark of respect.

**New full time manager at SOC.** Savong has appointed a full time live-in manager at the SOC to provide more structure for the children at the centre. Mr Nan previously had a supervisory role in a commercial organisation in Phnom Penh. Mr Nan

**Prize giving** following the scholarship exams had a new twist this year. Because the five winners still need to complete school they were not just granted financial assistance to do this over the next 12 months—they were also rewarded each with a new bicycle. The next four who nearly attained a scholarship were rewarded with books, a dictionary, pads and stationery as a prize.



**Bookmark these sister websites and spread the word!**

**SAVONG FOUNDATION-** [www.savongfoundation.org](http://www.savongfoundation.org) This website is beautifully designed and provides supporters with news

**SAVONG SCHOOL -** [www.savong.com](http://www.savong.com) This one has a focus on the school, but includes news, links to visitors and is one of the fund raising channels with a PayPal button.

**SAVONG ORPHANAGE—** [www.savongorphanage.com](http://www.savongorphanage.com) This one is managed by Savong and he posts news and events in the life of SOC.

## Draft Child Safety Policy for Savong School & SOC



Above is a photo taken on September 2nd at the SOC involving all staff and the children who live there. The topic of discussion was child safety—specifically the issue of smacking which is not an uncommon practice in Cambodia but which has fallen into disfavor as it has in the west. But at the SOC where three employees are parents, Savong found that more than one of these parents was disciplining her children not just with her hands, but with a stick.

Savong called a full meeting and explained to each and every child that smacking of any kind is unacceptable at SOC. He reiterated to the children that the SOC is there to provide a safe loving home, good food, clothing and education.

In a separate meeting with the parents (staff) he reprimanded them, and coached them in better ways to deal with their own kids when these children prove exasperating or naughty. “Count to 100,” he advised, “and encourage them when they do good things.” He also told them that the new full-time 24 hour manager, Mr Nan, would be there to offer firm discipline to the children if necessary—but without smacking.

Bear in mind that this discussion is taking place across Cambodia, and that the use of smacking or hitting is endemic in rural Cambodian society. (See boxed article.) In discussing the issue Savong is extremely adamant about the need for child safety and the simple objective of having all children in his care to live free from violence, free from hunger, and free from fear.

There’s an element of this passion of his that goes a lot deeper than common sense.

On my most recent visit, Savong told me a few stories from his own childhood which—when it boils down to it—gave him the burning desire to build a school, to provide a home and to give young people with poor backgrounds a better chance in life.

One incident took place when he was just 8, and selling banana cake to foreign UN soldiers - helping raise a little money for his family. This was 20 years ago in 1991 when Cambodia was re-emerging from its darkest days.

Locally-based UN soldiers would often buy cake, but one day one of the soldiers said—“would you like to earn more dollars? Come with me, and you can earn more dollars.” He lifted the young boy onto the back of the truck and started to drive off.

Savong’s older brother Savet saw what was happening and sprinted after the truck and demanded that the man hand his brother back. He was angry, and he bravely stood his ground.

“I was too young to understand,” Savong told me. But he said these things such as child abuse were—and still are—commonplace.

When he told me the story I knew he was thinking about Savet, his protector, who died last year of cancer. But I knew Savong was also thinking about how defenseless children are in this world. He’s passionate about the subject.

So a child safety policy in this context is far from being a foreign-based piece of paperwork, well-meaning, but imposed by outsiders.

Forming a policy is not easy however. I’ve visited a city-based orphanage which, out of necessity, has formed a kind of walled-garden to lock out outsiders and provide a safe haven for the children. I’ve also seen recommended Child safety Policies which are almost entirely predicated on the basis that sexual abuse is the *only* risk to children in countries such as Cambodia.

In reality the biggest risks revolve around community health: the risks of disease, and other poverty related risks. And in the countryside, where children in their thousands wander down the dusty lanes to school—is it realistic or even desirable to have a walled garden approach?

So on the following page I’ve drafted a Child Safety Policy and invite comment. In fact I’m a researcher, so in 10 days I’ll send to your email a short little feedback questionnaire to see if there are suggestions, ideas or healthy disagreements to help us refine the Policy.

Why have a policy? There are three good reasons. One is to have a clearly stated set of principles to which all management, staff and visitors can be held accountable. Here are the rules. The second reason is to help establish standards of best practice in other NGOs that work in the same area. Savong regularly meets with other NGO directors and they talk about these issues. The third is pragmatic. Sooner or later the Government will impose the requirement of all similar organizations to have clear guidelines and policies in place.

## THE CONTEXT

*Large-scale research into children’s attitudes towards violence has been undertaken by Tearfund, a relief and development NGO working in partnership with Christian agencies and churches in Cambodia. The first stage of the research involved focus groups of boys and girls aged 11-13 from an urban slum community, a rural community and a provincial town community, and found that most children believed that children should be beaten by teachers if they are disobedient or if they “made a mistake”, with few feeling that beating was inappropriate in some cases. Children also felt that parents should beat children if they “made a mistake”. The second stage, supported by the Ministry of Education, comprised a written questionnaire survey of 1,314 children aged 12-15. Half of the boys (50.5%) and over a third of the girls (36.4%) reported having been beaten by their parents; 82.4% of girls and 81.1% of boys reported witnessing other children being beaten by their parents. Nearly one in four girls (24.1%) and over one in three boys (34.7%) reported having been beaten by their teacher in school.”*

(Miles, G. & Varin, S., 2005, “Stop Violence Against Us!” A preliminary national research study into the prevalence and perceptions of Cambodian children to violence against children in Cambodia, Summary report, Tearfund)

# Draft Child Safety Policy for Savong School & SOC



Child Safety is of paramount importance at Savong School and the SOC. Children have the right to live without sickness, without violence and without fear.

This Child Safety Policy lays down the principles and rules for ensuring safety for all children within contact and within care of Savong School and the SOC.

**Safety from Injury and Sickness.** All children at the school and SOC shall be protected to our best endeavours from injury and sickness. This includes:

- Addressing potential causes of physical injury. For example putting up a safety fence to prevent young children from wandering, unattended around the fish ponds.
- Having clear steps to take in the case of accident or injury including first aid kits, contact numbers for medical or ambulance (and the phones to make these calls) and training of staff and older children in first-aid.
- Promoting best practices in hygiene, and in food preparation.
- Adopting a policy of “immediate attention” if any child is sick or has a health complaint.
- Having the resources (medical center, financial and transport) to ensure full medical care can be provided as soon as it may be necessary.

**Safety from violence.** All children have the right to physical safety. This includes the assurance that they will be safe in their home environment, their school environment and in their day to day life. Therefore:

- No physical violence, (hitting, physical disciplining, smacking, fighting) will be tolerated at the school or SOC. This includes physical violence from carers, visitors, staff, parents or fellow-students.
- Children will be treated respectfully and encouraged to report any violence if this occurs, and provided with protection if this is necessary.
- Police will be involved if there is any issue of violence that cannot be immediately resolved.

- The management and staff of the SOC and the school shall have clear steps to take in the case of a violent situation—including numbers for the local police (and the phones to make these calls). The fighting caused by local thieves who tried to steal from students is an example of this kind of situation.

**Safety from Fear.** All children at the school and SOC shall be protected to our best endeavours from situations that may put these children in harm’s way. All children will be treated with respect, just as we expect them to treat adults with respect.

- Management and supervisors have a duty of care to oversee the general running of the school and SOC and to keep an eye on the safety of all children. They shall have the authority to ask staff, carers, volunteers and visitors to comply with their requests. For example if they see anything that might even be construed as potentially unsafe behaviour. (A visitor, alone with a child—for example, or a would-be thief loitering around the school gates.)
- Bullying or verbal abuse will not be tolerated.
- Visitors may interact with the students at the school and children at the SOC, but always with local adults on-hand.
- The children’s own space—their bedrooms—is theirs, and visitors may not walk into these areas.
- In the interests of the children direct contact via phone, email or social media such as Facebook shall not occur between visitors, sponsors or volunteers unless this is explicitly authorised. The purpose of this is to protect children from the potential of predators, and to apply something of a “walled garden” approach to the way we treat cyberspace.
- Any suspected or actual sexual abuse or predatory behaviour of any child in the care of the school or SOC shall become, immediately, a police matter.

This policy shall be regularly reviewed. We have tried to make it not too prescriptive—but rather governed by a set of guidelines that apply to all.

The principle of providing safety from injury, sickness, violence and fear is supported by:

- A definition of the dangers and of those behaviours that shall not be permitted.
- Clear general guidelines for action, and a specific statement of the authority of Savong and his management team to oversee the safety of the children in their care, and take actions they may see necessary, regardless if these have been spelled out in detail here.
- An absolute bottom-line. There will be no tolerance of violence or any behaviour that compromises the safety of the children. Serious cases of suspected or actual violence or child abuse will become police matters without hesitation.

# Journeys for the Young

The children at SOC should never be described as lucky, but this year they have enjoyed journeys and excursions that must have been beyond their wildest imaginings. This is thanks to sponsors and visitors who have recognized that the development of these children goes beyond basic food and shelter. Excursions include out of town adventures to Battambang, to Phnom Penh and



Sihanoukville, as well as local adventures and picnics to favourite waterfall sites, the floating village, the lake of West Baray (near the airport) and to the fun fair where the children experienced for the first time how to drive (and crash!) the dodgem cars.

Our huge thanks to the sponsors of these journeys. The children talk about these trips, and laugh over their shared experiences. These holidays help the newer children feel part of the family.

## BOOK REVIEW:

# CAMBODIA'S CURSE

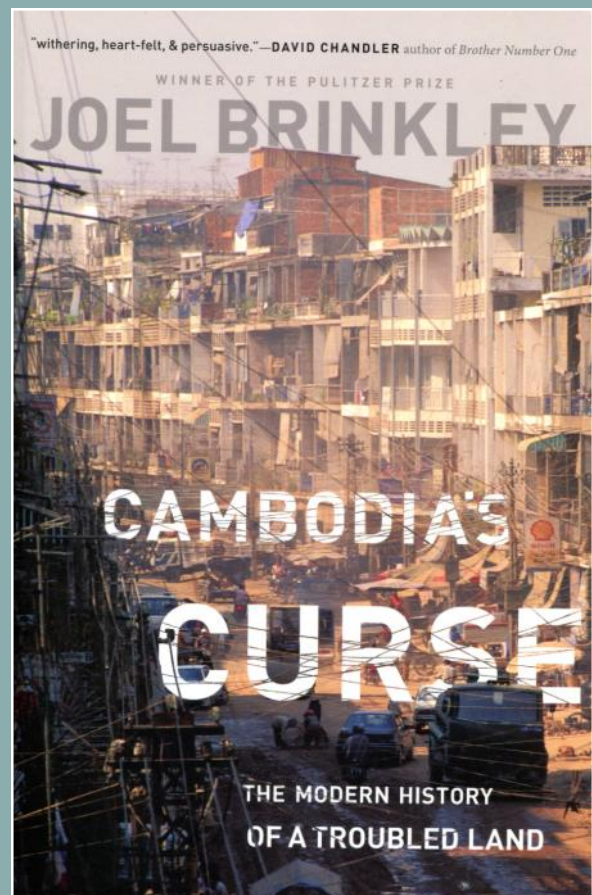
For anyone involved in Cambodia it is well worth reading up about this complex little nation. There are a plethora of books that focus on the horrors of the Pol Pot years—but Joel Brinkley's volume *Cambodia's Curse* helps us assess the modern Cambodia in which we're involved. Brinkley is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, and I respect his interpretation of what's happening in Cambodia. The sad truth is that Brinkley, who first covered the fall of the Khmer Rouge came back to Cambodia hoping to see renewal and hope. Instead he sees, behind the smiling tourist images, a country gripped both in post-traumatic stress disorder (which he believes affects at least a third of older survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime) and by a voracious system of greed and corruption that seeps into every level of society.

He is puzzled, and somewhat saddened, by recent surveys that report the popular sentiment that "Cambodia is heading in the right direction" and his view is that the Cambodian people have been fundamentally hoodwinked by those still in power.

This is a captivating read, and of course quite heartbreaking. Brinkley is a compassionate writer and he rails at the injustices that he documents. I read this book and learned a lot— and I really value the level to which it contextualizes what I see in Cambodia. I think all of us, doing whatever we can to support the children of Cambodia need to go in with our eyes wide open.

However where Brinkley sees little hope of true reform from the top of Cambodia's power structure, and little real effectiveness from international agencies that deal via the Government—I retain a lot more hope for change at a grassroots level, and as we've seen in the Middle east this year—a belief that the 'wisdom of the crowd' can suddenly find it's place.

I recommend this book. It is very provocative.



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- To remove your name from our mailing list, please let us know.
- And if you have spare money looking for a good home, you can always link to Secure PayPal site via the [www.savong.com](http://www.savong.com) website. On the left down the bottom of each page is a button: PLEASE DONATE. Email us if you'd like more details.