

Free education for children in rural Cambodia

SAVONG SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

Savong School Newsletter: Number 12: April 2012



The weight of family responsibility



In his roles as father, and as director of a school and orphanage, Savong really has many parental dramas. Many readers will recognise Kim San one of the older girls at the SOC. She is exceptionally bright and in the past 3 years has progressed through 6 Grades at school, and shows every prospect of being eligible for university in a couple of years when she finishes Grade 12. Yet last week she felt like throwing all this aside in order to take up a lowly-paid job waitressing in town.

The reason? The clue is in the photo she holds.

This was an interesting dilemma for us, because Kim San is 18 and within her rights to make her own choices. Her dilemma also challenged us, in a good way, about the responsibilities and boundaries of running a home for disadvantaged children in Cambodia.

How we responded is on the next page.

New sponsor for school journeys

Thanks to some vigorous social networking via a friend in Phnom Penh, Savong was able to meet with the RMA Group, importers of Ford vehicles into Cambodia and put his case to Dominique their PR Manager. The result, the company will sponsor full transport costs for classroom trips that take students further afield than the Bakong-Siem Reap-Angkor district.

These field trips are a revelation for the rural students at Savong's School: a chance to see other parts of Cambodia and to broaden their experience.



Letter from Duncan. Resolving a family crisis



Savong's project would not exist were it not for the internet. In 2004 when he was first making contact with prospective supporters, Savong knew instinctively that email and the internet were the key. He used to save up and spend \$2.00 per half hour at the internet café located near the Old Market, and in that half hour send brief emails and receive any news from overseas. So we owe a lot to the internet. But even so, I have been quite awestruck at the speed with which computers have become integral to the lives of the young Cambodians that you and I help support.

Those who are now attending university—ten students we collectively support—each are required to have laptop access for their university studies. Despite the heat and the dust—arch-enemies of any laptop motherboard—these students keep their laptops in pristine condition.

Recently a Phnom Penh based agency, a large NGO with much wider reach than us, went through a whole computer upgrade, and they kindly contacted us and donated 14 used laptops each of sound condition and ideal for the computer classroom at Savong's School. The good thing about laptops: they'll run for a couple of hours even without the noisy generator going in the background. In fact Cambodia seems to have largely leapfrogged PC technology.

For supporters of Savong's School, and for the hundreds of other overseas-supported schools in Cambodia, computers have certainly added to the annual budget, but that's progress, and part of my amazement about the computerisation of the school is that these days one can Skype Savong and the older students. Most Fridays I spend at least two hours talking face to face with these friends thousands of kms away.

One theme that comes through these conversations is how very deeply the children feel a responsibility for their own parents. Seyha has an incandescent smile and he's enjoying the challenge of university, but deep down he's worrying about the welfare of his parents. He told me that his plan

is to find a job when he graduates and to earn enough to take care of his mother and father who are old now. (Actually around my age.)

But this sentiment was demonstrated in vivid relief last week when Kim San, who many readers will know for her fierce intellect and her brilliant English skills, came to Savong pent up with tears. She wanted to leave SOC and get a job.



Savong asked her why, and Kim San told him how burdened she was to earn money to support her mother who lives in impoverished conditions near Poipet on the Thai border. Kim San wanted to throw everything in,

her schooling and her assured prospects of university, to take up a waitressing job so she could send her earnings (a waitress might earn \$45 a month) to her mother. She enjoys life at SOC, but the family commitment is stronger. Recent visitors to the SOC have mentioned how serious Kim San has been lately: clearly she has been worrying about her own role as daughter, and as student.

Savong explained to her that he wouldn't allow her to just leave school and that he would find a better answer. On Friday we discussed this face to face. The solution, given Kim San's age of 18, is to recognise her skills and appoint her an associate teaching role at the SOC—and to pay her a modest salary while continuing to provide a home for her as well as schooling. This salary will, for sure, be sent home to her mother and we are happy about this because the arrangement removes an obstacle between Kim San's family situation and her own educational future.

For Khmer new year (April 14-16) a sponsor has sent money to enable Kim San to visit her mother.

Student Profile—SOC



Chab, Chann and their mother—a widow who needed assistance.

Yes, we are looking for sponsors to help support these children.



This newsletter we feature a brother and sister who are quite new to the SOC. The boy's name is Det Chab, and he is 14 years old. Currently he is in Grade 7 at school. His sister is Sokchann, aged 12, is in Grade 3. They both come from Stoeng Village, Samraong Commune, Soutnekam District, Siem Reap Province. Their mother, Det Cheas, and is a 39 years old farmer and a widow.

As with some other children at the SOC, these students are from further afield than the immediate Bakong district. How do these families find the SOC? The contacts come through friends or family of people who have already met Savong. After a meeting takes place, and paperwork is cleared, the children are welcomed to the SOC.

Chab and Sokchann are making good progress, looking happier and healthier than when we first met them in January.

Effort is made to ensure that parents can stay in regular touch.

News briefs from Savong's projects

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

THE LOVE SCHOOL

One thing about life in Cambodia and the fact that such a big percentage of the population are in their 20s: there are heaps of weddings everywhere. However Savong's School actually had to close for a few days in early March because three teachers were each getting married: Salas, Kimhey and Sopheak. Some volunteers were fortunate to be in Siem Reap at the time—and got to experience the unique style of Cambodians wedding.

Right: teacher Salas' special day.



SOC—PHONE HOME

If you are visiting the school or SOC or are in Siem Reap for any time, you may probably buy a local phone. The basic Nokia prepay costs around \$US26 and saves those expensive global roaming calls you'd incur if you use your own phone.

But here's how you can assist. Before you leave Siem Reap, give the phone to the SOC. We're gradually giving phones to parents and families of the SOC children so they can be in closer contact with their children.

A phone is a useful inexpensive thing to donate - and it will help connect our students to their families.

SOC—DREAM COMES TRUE

Extremely generous Australian donors caused a big stir at the SOC recently with the donation of a 125cc Honda Dream. The SOC family of students and staff had been asking Savong for ages about getting a run-about motorbike for the trips to market, and for errands to and from the SOC and the school. Already the Honda is in frequent use—it is making lives a lot easier. A big thank-you to Kate and Lesley-Anne for making this possible. (And for ensuring a helmet is included!)



TAKING THE CAKE

Birthdays are not traditionally marked as big events in Cambodia—but as with other Western traditions, including hip-hop music, group photos and Christmas; local children have proved quick to adopt. Last week the SOC children got together and partied to celebrate Kruoch's birthday. Kruoch is the girl who had the successful eye-operation late last year. The party was a raging success, the cake was devoured and the event proved a good moment of celebration for the SOC family, prior to New Year which takes place in mid-April. New year is a time when several of the children will return, for a week or two, to their own homes.

SUPPORT FOR LITTLE AKUT

The boy in the photo has, we think, the winningest smile in all of Cambodia, and that's really saying something. His name is Akut and he's had a tough life—not only through being raised through extreme poverty, but also because of the physical challenges he was born with: his fingers on each hand are partially fused so he is quite disabled. His family found themselves unable to care for Akut, who also found himself picked-on at school. Well, now he's at the SOC and surrounded by friends. He also found a sponsor, a long term supporter from Singapore, Siew Leng who is seen here, celebrating their new friendship.



Bookmark these sister websites and spread the word!

SAVONG FOUNDATION- www.savongfoundation.org This website is beautifully designed and provides supporters with news

SAVONG SCHOOL - 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 This one is managed by Savong and he posts news and events in the life of SOC.

Definitely a Budget Challenge Ahead

We've often said the project is like holding onto a hot-air balloon, and keeping it grounded even while the project swells and takes off. This is a healthy tension between having big and useful dreams offset by practical, pragmatic feet-on-the-ground realism. In seven years the balance has been quite manageable.

The monthly budget has definitely ballooned however thanks mostly to the intake of many new children into the SOC, (14 children in 2008—closer to 40 children today) as well as the significant commitment to supporting students through University. This chart is an approximation, (month to month the expenses may vary) and excludes the injection of capital into the system—for example the significant building costs met by supporters for the Library, the SOC and the Student Centre in town.

There is definitely a challenge ahead however, with scholarships accounting for an increasing slice of the funds - until 2016 when this will plateau (graduates coming off the scholarship will more or less equal the new intake,) and general standards lifting across the entire project. For example in 2005 when the school opened computerisation seemed a distant prospect—but now we would be

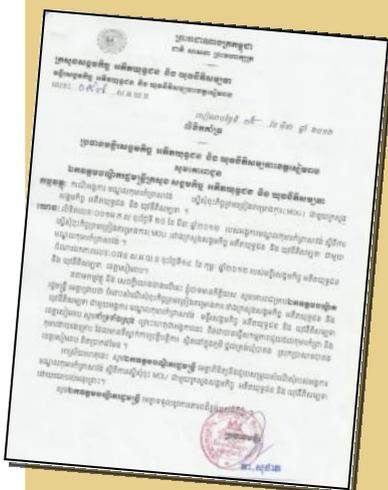


Monthly costs are now close to \$US4,000.

short-changing the students if we did not offer computer tuition. The scholarships, likewise, are a logical update of the original vision for the school—to provide a link between the rural students of Bakong and the employment prospects in nearby Siem Reap. Originally this link was mainly via the use of language as a foot-in-the-door for tourism and hospitality jobs: but as Cambodia's employment scene evolves, so has our service to the students of Bakong.

New registration attained for SOC.

For the past 16 months the Cambodian government has been drafting tighter regulations governing Orphanages and other NGOs in an effort to organize this sector, introduce a raft of



minimum standards and to clean out shady operators. This last month the SOC attained registration with the Ministry, and compared to the old previous compliance required for registration, Savong reported that the new regulations (and requisite paperwork,) were a lot more demanding. A good thing.

One benefit of attaining registration, quite apart from transparent

legitimacy, is a greater degree of protection and support from Government. In one conversation with the Ministry they were quite blunt about it. If a child died under the watch of an orphanage, the Director would likely go to jail. For the Director of a registered orphanage there would be greater protection from the Ministry: an enquiry perhaps, but no jail unless genuine wrongdoing were found.

One side effect of the new requirements is the more formalized process, at the SOC, of having a written contract with the families of children so that the expectations of both parties are written down.

This covers things such as schooling—so that an orphanage that promises schooling for the children—really has to deliver on that promise and otherwise the parents have a clear process by which they can lay a complaint.

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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 website. On the left down the bottom of each page is a button: PLEASE DONATE. Email us if you'd like more details.