

# A winter well spent

After spending nearly three months in Cambodia, living with our students and visiting with graduates and high school kids, we are more enthused than ever about their sincerity and the positive impact of our program.

Staying in the Student Center and interacting with the students on a daily basis allowed us to get to know them as individuals. Carol's afternoon English lessons always had them howling with laughter. Once we got past the initial shyness all our students seem to have, we could see they had a lot of pride in what they were doing. We were invited to go to their schools, to see their classroom, to meet their new friends. Time and time again, in moments of seriousness, a student would say how much the gift of education meant to them and how they hoped they would be able to make a difference when they returned home. It is impressive to hear a young college kid make such a sincere, and mature, statement. I believe it reflects how aware the Indigenous People are of the rapid changes happening to their part of the world, and the impact to their community. To hear a student say they want to do something about the changes, to have a part in shaping the future of their community makes me hopeful for them and for our efforts.

Currently, the majority of our graduates are living and working in Mondulkiri province. They have become our main source for screening and recommending new students from there. In Ratanakiri province we have a somewhat different situation. Five years ago we were asked to help supplement rent for a small house being used to house indigent girls attending high school in Ban Lung, the province capital. The local agency that had initiated the project has since pulled out and left us to support the house and the girls. Because it is a 'safe house' there are many deserving indigent kids who want to qualify for our help. We have used this opportunity to develop a feeder program for CCI for Ratanakiri. We are now interviewing prospective high school students who would like to reside in the house, to determine if they could become candidates for our university program. Using our example of providing shelter, food and tutoring, we are instilling the notion that helping others is something each student should consider doing in the future whether or not they go on to graduate HS or attend college.

So it was pleasing to hear each of our four HS seniors say that they would like to apply for our college scholarship program and that they wanted to choose a field which would allow them to do the most good for their people. The top two fields? Teaching and nursing.

Last on our list of feel good activities, a meal with program graduates. As Tommy, Rich and I can all attest, to be able to sit down with our graduates as we all have, in a relaxed setting and listen to them describe what they are doing and how proud they are of doing something meaningful is very powerful. It makes all that we do worthwhile. And none of those accomplishments would be possible without our wonderful supporters.

Our fledgling program in Ratanakiri is a great example of how our graduates are going to be able to influence the future of their people. Not only are they already role models, but they each are going to be able to influence others in their careers. And behind that is the fact that as friends and fellow CCI graduates they will have a network of resources and support for each other. Here is what our graduate infrastructure looks like in Oya dow district, Ratanakiri province, as of March 2017. Two are teachers, both local, able to speak the tribal languages and able to help their Indigenous students navigate the Khmer system. One nurse, one midwife, also able to act as intermediaries with the Khmer doctors and patients. One Veterinary Technician, employed by a NGO to improve the health of the local cattle and pigs. One community representative who acts as liaison between the Indigenous community and a foreign mining company now developing what was recently Indigenous land. And last, one business graduate working for a micro loan company specializing in small loans to small farmers. Seven young graduates all able to influence outcomes for their people. Dedicated CCI graduates, all working within the "system" to improve the future of the Indigenous People.

Footnote: In the above example, one teacher Sev Yem was sponsored by Counterparts, the nurse and midwife were sponsored by Rich Webster, and the Vet Tech was sponsored by Max Lund.