

## A Visit to Cambodia - Focusing on Friendship with Cambodia's Programs - February 2024



Carol Pucci and Tom Auciello have been donors and volunteers for Friendship with Cambodia since their first trip to Cambodia in 2005, on a tour led by Friendship with Cambodia director Bhavia Wagner. Since then they have helped FWC with education and fundraising, created the maps in our book *Responsible Travel Guide Cambodia*, sponsored students for 20 years, and gave us a major gift which allowed us to start our [Education for Low-Income Rural Youth Fund](#). They asked Bhavia if she would like to travel with them to re-visit Cambodia and see our projects. We went to Cambodia in February, but it was already hot.

In the photo, Carol and Tom are meeting with one of their sponsored students who graduated in 2014. Sien Sok-Ny is from an indigenous group in Cambodia. The indigenous people are struggling to maintain their culture and their livelihoods. Sok-Ny graduated in Management and worked for the Cambodian Indigenous People's Organization as a program officer. She supported indigenous women and youth to expand their educational opportunities and she helped them create savings groups which give loans to group members to improve their living conditions. Now she volunteers, leading an indigenous women's group and helping indigenous people sell their organic fruit and vegetables, and forest products, like honey. Sok-Ny is married and has three children.

It is very heartening to see how her university education empowered her to help indigenous communities.



We attended the Sunday meeting of our sponsored university students in Phnom Penh. The University Student Program Director, Cheam Kosal, is in the center of the photo to the left of the young man in the front row. The rest of our students attend university in Battambang.



At each Sunday meeting, a group of students makes a presentation to the other students. This week's topic was about the increase of traffic accidents and how to be safe. This exercise helps our students learn to do research, work together as a team, practice speaking in public, and build their self-confidence. The topics are always relevant to the students' lives. Some are personal, like using social media or adjusting to life in the city. And some are about social problems such as domestic violence, use of alcohol, migration for labor, deforestation, etc.



Another one of our alumni, Sung Sreyhuon, graduated in Social Work in 2021.

Sreyhuon was the first person in her family to go to university. Her parents did not support her decision to stay in school and go to college. They said, "That's not for girls, you should become a wife." This is a common attitude in rural areas, but Sreyhuon persisted.

She said FWC's program helped her figure out her major, become more self-aware, develop leadership skills, improve her English, and gain a sense of community.

Sreyhuon now works for AusCam Freedom Project, a trafficking prevention program that focuses on empowering at-risk young women. She is a case worker and teaches skills like communication, team work, problem solving, and leadership. Sreyhuon trains girls to share information with others, such as education about HIV/AIDS, and she facilitates building sisterhood.

Besides helping society through her work, she is now able to support her family and help her younger brother and cousin stay in school by providing school supplies and money.

She said that if FWC hadn't have helped her go to university, she would have become a factory worker.



We invited some of our alumni to come to this meeting and make presentations. Tham Sao-Run, graduated in accounting in 2017. FWC sponsored her for 10 years, from 7th grade through university. Sao-Run grew up in an extremely poor family and had only one set of clothes that she had to wear for three years. Now she works for KHANA, an organization that helps people with HIV/AIDS. She encouraged our undergraduates to work hard and never give up until they fulfill their dreams. She is starting a library in her village and we gave her some money to buy books.





Another one of our alumni, Seang Samen, graduated in nursing in 2018. She is pictured here with Cheam Kosal, director of our University Student Sponsorship Program. Samen had a very high score on her final exam and was invited to work at the prestigious Kantha Bopha Children's Hospital in Phnom Penh, which provides free care to poor children.

Recently, Samen passed the exam to work for the government and is currently employed as an operating room nurse at a government hospital.

Now she can afford to cover the expenses for her sister to attend university and also supports her parents.

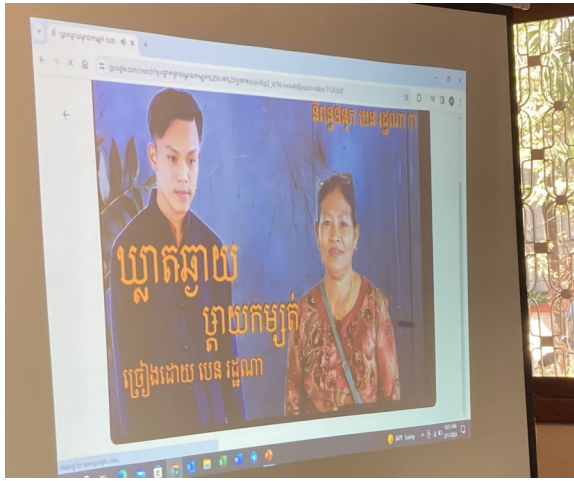


The students told us about their community service projects in their home villages, including teaching hygiene (handwashing and brushing teeth), encouraging reading and giving away books, menstruation care, and teaching traditional games at the Khmer New Year to preserve cultural traditions.



We all enjoyed a delicious lunch together, including red dragon fruit for dessert.





One of our students, Ben Rathna, is a singer songwriter who is majoring in music composition. He wants to become a music producer. He played a couple of his music videos for us, including a song to his mother telling her to not be sad because he is going off to college. You can listen to his songs on his You Tube Channel

[www.youtube.com/@Rathna.Singer](http://www.youtube.com/@Rathna.Singer)



Cambodia has changed a lot in recent years. Chinese investors built over 100 skyscrapers in Phnom Penh, most are apartment buildings. China also built Cambodia's only port, expressways, hydro plants, and will soon build a new international airport. If Cambodia cannot pay back the loans, China will own a lot of Cambodia's key infrastructure. The Chinese also turned the whole city of Sihanoukville into a gambling destination for Chinese tourists. Cambodia's middle class has grown. However, life for the poor, such as these fishmen in the photo, has not improved.



Bhavia Wagner (center), Founder and Executive Director of Friendship with Cambodia, met with Dr. Leng Lieng (right). Lieng was one of 50 medical doctors to survive the genocide and her story is included in Bhavia's book *Soul Survivors: Stories of Women and Children in Cambodia*. Cheam Kosal (left), our University Student Program Director, translated for us today, as she did when we all worked together on the book, 30 years ago, in 1994. Lieng is mostly retired from her medical practice and now lives in a Buddhist monastery with other widows.





One afternoon we took an architectural tour led by a recent graduate from the School of Fine Arts Architectural Program. She showed us French colonial buildings, including the post office pictured here (left). Tuk-tuks (like the one in the photo) and taxis can easily be arranged through an app called Grab (similar to Uber). You can put in your pick up point, destination, and pay for your ride on your phone. We stopped at an old Chinese temple (right) which was celebrating the Chinese New Year - the year of the Dragon.



We met with staff from one of our partner organizations, Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC). We are funding their safe shelter for girls and women who are survivors of gender violence. In 2023, the shelter helped 90 women who were trafficked to China. They were forced into marriages and, later, managed to escape. The Cambodian government helped them return to Cambodia and referred them to our program.

CWCC has many important programs, including supporting migrant workers from Cambodia going to Thailand to get legal papers, so they won't be exploited. They have a program to prevent violence against women through raising awareness about gender equality, women's rights, and trafficking. Their anger management program for men helps men control and release their anger. Sixty-five percent of the men in their program stop their abusive behavior. CWCC offers skillful parenting training. The women in their economic empowerment programs join savings groups and start income generation projects, like learning tailoring or raising frogs, pigs, or mushrooms. CWCC supports youth groups and vocational training, such as web development, computer repair, hair styling, hospitality, air conditioning repair, and more.





One of the highlights of our trip was visiting our rural partner NGO called Orphans, Elderly, and Disabled Development Organization (OEDDO) and meeting many of the people we have been supporting. We helped fund Srey Mouy (left) through medical school. She and her husband (far right in photo), also a medical doctor, are practicing medicine in Kampot City about 1.5 hours away. They volunteer at OEDDO on their days off. Vanna (center of photo), is a widow and the founder and Co-Director of OEDDO. Her son Hieng (second from the right) is the other Co-Director. He has an MBA. All of them are extremely loving, caring, and capable people who work selflessly (as volunteers) to help those who are in the greatest need. It was heart-warming to see all the people they serve and how those people, in turn, are kind to others.



This family was homeless, living on a sidewalk and feeling completely hopeless. They lost their jobs at a garment factory and lost their housing. OEDDO took them in and gave them food and shelter. FWC funded training the husband to be our ambulance driver for the new hospital.



The young woman on the right, Rathana, is an orphan who grew up at the OEDDO center, along with her sister and grandmother (left). She was at the top in her class in nursing school and is now preparing to open our new hospital.



The building behind the OEDDO volunteers is the new hospital. It still needs about \$30,000 worth of equipment, including an x-ray machine. They hope to open the hospital later this year.





Gathered to welcome us were many of the elderly widows who are being supported with food and medicine by OEDDO (and FWC). All of them are genocide survivors, and some witnessed their family members being executed “for no reason.” Carol said to them, “You look happy. How can you be happy after going through that tragic experience?” They said, “We are happy because now we don’t have to worry about how we are going to survive, because OEDDO is helping us.”



These young men have similar backgrounds. Their fathers died and their mothers had to move to the city to work in factories to survive and couldn’t take their children with them. Nou (left) came to live in the OEDDO orphanage when he was 10 and Nang (right) came when he was 8. Both have cerebral palsy. Nou has trouble walking and Nang is developmentally delayed. FWC helped OEDDO open this farm supplies and animal feed store to give them meaningful work to do now that they are adults.



Trong and his brothers came to live at the OEDDO orphanage when they were in their teens. They had never been to school. OEDDO’s tutor helped them learn to read, write, and do math. When Trong turned 18, he wanted to learn jewelry making and FWC funded his vocational training. Now he has a good job working for a jeweler making gold rings. He enjoys his work and, on his days off, volunteers to help at the OEDDO center.





Enjoying local food is always a highlight when traveling abroad. One morning we went on a food tour and sampled some of Cambodia's popular dishes.



We stopped to look around a produce market. This woman is selling a nutritious vegetable that grows in ponds everywhere.



This family is making Cambodian-style donuts.



Tom and Carol are trying a bowl of Cambodian noodle soup, which is very popular for breakfast.



Kampot Province is famous for its black pepper. It is considered some of the best in the world. While visiting OEDDO, we toured this organic pepper farm.



Pepper grows on a vine and the pepper corns can be eaten when they are green, black, or red.





The pandemic was devastating for many people and businesses in Cambodia. While in Cambodia, we worked on updating our book [Responsible Travel Guide Cambodia](#) and checked to see which businesses were still open. In Phnom Penh, only 25% of the restaurants, 30% of the craft shops, and 60% of the socially responsible hotels survived the pandemic. Peace Handicrafts (left) and Wat Than Artisans Cambodia (right) both managed to stay open. The products at both stores are made by people disabled by landmines or polio.



These fair-trade earrings are made from recycled bullet shells.



Although many responsible businesses closed as a result of the pandemic, it was nice to see that some new ones have opened, including One Day Spa and Beauty Salon, an NGO program to train and employ at-risk girls.

There is a green presence in Cambodia now. Several shops are selling organic food. Eleven is an organic restaurant that serves food from their own farm. It is also 99% plastic free.

As a result of this trip, we were able to update our list of responsible restaurants, hotels, fair-trade craft shops and other businesses in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. This new information is available on our website. Our book, *Responsible Travel Guide Cambodia (2017)*, is now available as a free download. All of these resources are on the [Responsible Travel Guides page](#) on the Friendship with Cambodia website.

**The best part of our trip was connecting with the people who receive our help and seeing the value and effectiveness of our programs.**

**[Click here](#) if you would like to make a donation. Thank you for your support!**