

WHAT'S UP MUSKOKA

Cambodian Connection

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By Matt Driscoll



Muskoka Rotarians recently donated 1,097 bicycles to Cambodian students

Photograph: Linda Brouillette

Cambodia Mission a Life-changing Experience

A recent charity mission to Cambodia has changed lives both at home and abroad.

Last month, a group of 19 Rotarians from Bracebridge and Gravenhurst spent 19 days in Cambodia, where they distributed 1,097 bicycles to students.

The trip was spearheaded by Lisa McCoy of Gravenhurst, who spends six months out of every year performing humanitarian work in Cambodia. During that time, she has helped to build schools, libraries and distribute hundreds of bikes.

"To have so many friends and big-hearted people join me to do hands-on humanitarian work alongside Cambodian people has been the highlight of these six months," says McCoy, via e-mail from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where she continues her humanitarian work.

McCoy says she has been focused on bicycles because they are one of the most effective ways to ensure that Cambodia's younger generation gets a good education.

McCoy says the January trip took nearly a year of planning, and she thanked all of the Rotary Clubs from across Ontario that donated funds to buy the bicycles. She was especially grateful to Bill and Dora Rathbun of Gravenhurst for taking her to 17 different Rotary Clubs to help raise funds. In total, over \$50,000 was raised to purchase the bicycles, which cost approximately \$50 each.

"Most children only get a Grade 6 education and primary children walk many kilometres each day to school," she says. "A bicycle changes all that. It is the ticket to education and to future growth in this small developing country."

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Cambodia Mission a Life-changing Experience

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For Ruth Bell-Towns of Bracebridge, her first mission to Cambodia is one that will remain etched in her memory forever.

“It was challenging, but rewarding,” says Bell-Towns, now back at home in Bracebridge. “We got the opportunity to see first-hand how they live. It was one of those life-changing things.”

Bell-Towns says she wanted to be a part of the mission from the moment she first heard that Rotary was planning a trip.

“This was very in-your-face, but I think it was good for us,” she says. “There is a great deal of poverty in the country. When you’re out in the rural areas and you see the people working, you really wonder if they’re only out working to get enough food for that day and then they have to start all over again.”



Photograph: Linda Brouillette

The mission included a bicycle delivery to a schoolhouse located inside a Phnom Penh dump.

“There are families who live in the dump and they make their living by scavenging,” she says. “The children normally don’t go to school because they can make money scavenging in the dump, and their parents can’t afford to let them go to school.”

Cambodia still bears the scars of the Pol Pot regime that killed more than one million people, and the guests acknowledged the country’s difficult past by visiting some of the memorials along the way.

“In Phnom Penh we visited a school that had been converted to a prison during the Pol Pot regime,” she says. “It was a place where people would be tortured before being sent to what’s called ‘the killing fields’.”

Other unintended reminders of the regime include millions of landmines planted throughout the country. Bell-Towns says missing limbs and severe burns were common in the villages they visited and served as reminders that the mines remain a serious problem.

Nonetheless, Bell-Towns says the group received a warm welcome in the countryside, and the students were overjoyed to receive their bikes. The bikes are often used by up to three children at the same time on the way to school, says Bell-Towns, and again by their parents to travel to market.

Bell-Towns says the trip has made her even more thankful for the everyday luxuries most Canadians enjoy, but she would gladly consider a return to Cambodia if there was another opportunity to help.

“I think we did some good ... but I would love to be able to do even more,” she says.