

School projects in Cambodia continue for McCoy Karen Longwell

January 13, 2011

Giving back has become the norm for local resident and Rotarian Lisa McCoy.

Last year McCoy celebrated the opening of the Muskoka School, an educational project funded in large part by area donors, in a remote area of Cambodia. She returned to the country this past fall to give out bicycles with Rotary Wheels for Learning, an international program of the Rotary Club of Gravenhurst.

While in Cambodia this time, she is looking for a new school project in the neighbouring country of Laos.

She is also involved with projects to distribute dental supplies and educational materials. She took some time to answer a few questions about her six-month trip.

Question: Where are you spending your six months?

I am spending five months in Cambodia and one month in northern Laos in the surrounding remote hill areas of Luang Prabang. I arrive in Luang Prabang on Dec. 25 and will have Christmas dinner with fellow Ontarian and Rotarian Steve Rutledge from Cobourg, Ontario. I will spend the month there researching a future Muskoka School site there for impoverished hill tribe children. I will also be researching the possibility of future Rotary Wheels for Learning bicycle distributions for poor children there.

In Cambodia, I have spent one month living in the small village of Trapeang Thum in Takeo province, bathing, eating, and [spending] day-to-day life as the rest of the village folk, up at 5 a.m. with the sun and to bed at 6 p.m.

I'll be going out to the Muskoka School in Ta Trav village and will help distribute some of the 100 bicycles that were fundraised by our Giant Garage Sale that was held at the Gravenhurst Curling Club this past summer.

Question: What projects are you working on that Muskokans contributed to?

The Rotary Club of Gravenhurst's international program Rotary Wheels for Learning has now distributed 155 bicycles to children in rural Takeo and Battambang provinces. A huge number of these were distributed to children of landmine survivors. We hope to raise funds to distribute another 70 bicycles for children in Battambang province before my April 1 return to Canada.

Bill and Dora Rathbun of Gravenhurst, Cathy Jordan and fellow members of the Rotary Club of Huntsville have contributed their time and dollars in selling close to 40 Cambodian silk scarves, which raised proceeds of close to \$1,000 which so far has provided over 2,000 toothbrushes and tubes of toothpaste to over 2,000 children and their families.

Many folks in Muskoka have purchased lovely handmade woven bracelets made by poor women here in rural Cambodia. The \$200 raised in sales has gone to start 10 women off in a one-week bracelet weaving course which was recently completed in rural Takeo.

Question: What does it mean for Cambodians to have a bicycle or dental care?

Every smile I receive when handing over that first bike for a child, every project that provides even the smallest improvement in a rural person's life over here is what keeps me returning. Having lived for a month on a village level has given me a humbling appreciation for every grain of rice that a farmer harvests. The manual labour involved in harvesting rice is unimaginable, and the farmers barely make enough sporadic income from this to feed their large families.

Question: What was it like to live in a rural village for three weeks?

Village life is not by any means quiet, as many might think. There are farmers hand-threshing their rice well into the night as they beat it on large wood tables outside their homes. Dogs howl all night and in the daytime they run through everyone's property killings neighbours' chickens.

Rice, rice and more rice - that's pretty well the village diet. One day we'd have it with fish from a nearby pond. The next day we ate it with fried frog from another pond. My friend Pauline and I were the only white people living in the village. No one spoke English, but we had a fun time communicating with the ever-friendly and smiling village people. All-in-all it was a fun experience, and always full of excitement and challenges.

More information on some of McCoy's projects can be found at her blogs at <http://schoolsforcambodia.blogspot.com> or <http://rotarywheelsforlearning.blogspot.com>.



DENTAL HELP
Gravenhurst resident Lisa McCoy hands out dental supplies to Cambodian children recently.