

My Cambodian Experience Rebecca Gennard 2010



I have volunteered with an organization called Outreach International and worked for a company called Cambodian Handicraft Association (CHA), for Landmine and Polio victims in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The CHA was set up in 2000 by a local group of Khmer people who realized how difficult it was to obtain any sort of employment as a disabled person in Cambodia. The organization offers the disabled artists a new skills base which will eventually allow them to return to their communities and lead a normal life. This helps immensely with their rehabilitation into society.

My application to take part in Outreach International was a very impulsive decision, I wanted to have an adventure, I wanted to help someone and I wanted to have a taste of a different culture. This is by far one of the best things I have ever done.



Everyone at CHA was very kind and welcoming, although at the start it was a little lonely as there was such a great language barrier. The women's English was not that great and my Khmer was non-existent, at the start, but I found that laughter is a universal language, so having a sense of humour has helped my success on the project. I have been accepted into their little community. Lunch is provided for all of the women at CHA and I was also invited to join them, which I did every lunchtime. Throughout my time on the project, I have eaten a range of different things from stuffed frogs to unripe papaya. I have actually grown to love the Khmer food. I feel as though I have really experienced the Khmer culture. They have also taught me to cook a Khmer dish, which I helped to prepare one lunchtime.

The main project that I was working on throughout my time in Cambodia was the new company website. I have been sorting out written work; cutting out what was not needed and correcting the English. I have also been photographing some of their products which will be put on the website with the hope to start selling things on the web. By creating a new website the hope is that they will receive more orders. Eventually they aim to set up an online shop so they can sell their products all over the world to earn more money. This will mean that they will be able to invite more women to attend the project giving them a better chance in life.

As I have come from a textile design background I have also been helping Thai Ly (the design director) with design ideas for orders that come in from other countries. I have taught some of the women new embroidery stitches and new techniques like appliqué, so they can use them in their everyday work. I have shown them how to transfer patterns onto fabric and created the tools that they need to carry this method out, so it is something they can use for years to come. The process is called pricking and pouncing. I also produced some new products that use their scrap fabrics, with the hope that they can sell them in the shop. The products include bunting, embroidered cards and embellished purses.



Throughout the project I have been teaching Basic English to three women who knew no English at all. The English lessons went well. At first it was really difficult as I didn't know any Khmer and they didn't know any English. One of my girls also didn't know how to read and write in Khmer, so using an English/Khmer dictionary wasn't that helpful either. But after I had, had a few Khmer lessons it was a lot easier. My class had three young women in, and I have taught them easy greetings, for example "hello" and "how are you" as well as names of animals, body parts and clothing. I have also been teaching them the sounds that the letters make. With the hope it will help them with the pronunciation and eventually help them reading English. I taught them through drawing pictures and playing games. In Cambodia they are not taught in this way, they are taught through repetition, repeating words over and over again, so I tried to make the lessons fun. Sometimes I would take the whole class when the main teacher could not attend the lesson. These lessons were a lot more interactive, as most of the women understood what I was asking them to do, we would do role plays and include the whole class. I didn't think I would like teaching but I really do, its good fun. It's a great feeling to know that I am helping them become more employable when they leave the CHA project because even knowing the small amount of English will go a long way.



Throughout my time here I have had the opportunity to travel. I have fallen in love with Cambodia. The people are so lovely, friendly and fun. They don't take life too seriously, and they have a strong sense of community. I have been on a few trips with CHA, the first being a Cambodian wedding, the wedding was in Takeo (in the country) so we had to travel 3 hours to get there. We arrived at a small village, where they lived in wooden houses, they appeared to be quite poor. Three generations would live in a house, which was just a large room with dividers separating the area into bedrooms. I don't think that many of the young children had ever seen a white person before, so I got a lot of attention. I was made to feel very welcome, I was included in all the wedding traditions. It was all very different from an English wedding, for one the bride and groom changed their outfits about 6 to 7

times, they were all different colours and the bride's dresses were highly decorated with beads and sequins.



Another trip I went on with CHA was to a weaving village. I got to see how they made the scarves and the long lengths of silk. It was really interesting for me to see these processes as textiles is my passion. They would receive the plain white strands of silk and dye the strands to the right colour before they started. The whole village was involved in creating silk fabric, every house would have a loom. They used weaving to create extra income. The villagers would learn the trade from a young age, so they could help their families.



I have very much enjoyed my Cambodian experience and it has made a lasting impression on me I would like to thank the Catenians for there support in making my dream possible.

Rebecca Gennard
CHA Textile Project, Cambodia, 2010