

Agnes Scott

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Shared Interests



Harpwell students at the dormitory in Phnom Penh

An author's visit to Agnes Scott helps create a new generation of women leaders in Cambodia. **BY MEGAN TERRASO**



Alan Lightman eats with Harpwell students in Phnom Penh.

Alan Lightman, a best-selling author and physicist, was visiting a small village in Cambodia with a friend in 2003 when he was approached by a few desperate women. They held out their babies and cried, "Please build us a school!"

"That was a direct request; that's sort of like seeing a car wreck right in front of you. What do you do?" said Lightman during a visit to Agnes Scott in 2009. "Since I have been involved in the education business for a lot of my life, I felt like it was something I could contribute to. I made a pledge to the people in that village that I would help them build a school."

Lightman was visiting Agnes Scott to discuss his work in Cambodia, as well as his book *Einstein's Dreams*, a 1992 international best-seller, a fictional account of the scientist and his dreams as a young man. While on campus, he was immediately struck by how passionate the students were about social justice and helping others.

"I've been to a lot of colleges and universities in the U.S., maybe 150 or more, and I've never found students who are so committed to public service—who had such a social consciousness as I've found here at Agnes Scott," Lightman, 62, said. "I'm extremely impressed."

Since his visit in 2009, Lightman and his Harpswell Foundation, founded in Cambodia to educate and support Cambodia's future female leaders, have collaborated with Agnes Scott in a growing number of ways that have become an enduring partnership. Agnes Scott students have shared their talents and time in Cambodia, and Harpswell's students have, in turn, visited Agnes Scott and shared their skills and very different life experiences with the campus community.

"Study in the United States gives Harpswell students an international perspective that is very useful for placing the problems of Cambodia in a larger context. Such study also exposes Harpswell students to Western culture and makes them more sophisticated about the world," says Lightman. "These students can enrich the ASC community by sharing their culture, widening the perspective of American students and helping American students place their mostly privileged lives in a larger context."

"Finally, the Cambodian students have all been trained in leadership skills and are deeply committed to becoming leaders of their country. These kinds of values can be absorbed by the students at ASC."

First steps

When Lightman returned from Cambodia in 2003, he began raising funds to make good on his promise to the women of the village. Through the Harpswell Foundation, a four-room school was completed in 2005, and the foundation has since expanded its efforts in the village, called Tramung Chrum, to include agricultural projects, the building of a motorcycle repair shop owned and managed by the villagers and a health care program to provide transportation and funds for villagers to receive medical care in a neighboring area.

However, the primary goal of the Harpswell Foundation is to create Cambodia's future leaders—women with the skills and drive to change their country for the better, with an emphasis on empowering women through housing, education and leadership training. Cambodia's tragic history—including the killing

Diplomatic ties

Leaphea Yang arrived at Agnes Scott this fall to soak up as much as she possibly could about the United States and political science. A student sponsored by the Harpswell Foundation, Yang graduated earlier this year from Cambodia's Royal University of Law and Economics with a degree in law. She's continuing her studies at Agnes Scott for a year before going on to graduate school to study political science elsewhere in the United States. Her ultimate goal is to be a diplomat for Cambodia.



"We need diplomats to negotiate. I want peace not only for Cambodia but for people all over the world," Yang says.

Yang went to study and work with the Harpswell Foundation in Phnom Penh from her home in Banteay Meanchey, a province in Northwest Cambodia near the border of Thailand. Her parents sold noodles in the local market there.

Yang visited six different Asian countries (Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand) as part of a tour with Harpswell before coming to Agnes Scott. Though she's only been in the U.S. for a short time, Yang says she has already learned much about American culture and communication.

"Americans talk very frankly. In Cambodia, we try to use soft words and not to hurt each other. Americans seem to say what they think. But Americans don't get as angry; they want to find a solution. It's just different," Yang says.

of much of the country's educated class in the 1970s, as well as the dearth of opportunities available to women—emphasizes the country's great need for better-educated women.

Not having a safe place to live while attending college has prevented young women from the more than 90 percent of the population living outside Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, from receiving a college education. While male Cambodian students can stay in one of the many Buddhist temples near the university, as is the tradition, women cannot.

Addressing this obstacle, Harpswell has built two women's residence halls in Phnom Penh that provide housing for 84 women attending local universities in the city. The newer residence hall includes a library, computer lab and conference center. Top female students are recruited from all over Cambodia by the foundation and given training in critical thinking, international events and leadership when not attending class. They are also provided with food, free classes in English and French, computer skills, readings and discussion of current events in Cambodia and the world and a weekly leadership seminar.

When building the second girls' residence hall in 2010, Lightman decided that he'd like to include a room called The Hall of Great Women with photos and short bios of women who could inspire Harpswell's students. He invited several student organizations on campus to provide nominees, bios and photos that now hang in the hall, along with a plaque



Darah Tabrum '11 (top row, second from left) with Harpswell students in Phnom Penh, summer 2010

acknowledging Agnes Scott's contributions to the project, says Director of Career Planning Catherine Neiner, who helped bring Lightman to campus and continues to serve as a liaison with Harpswell.

Soon after, Darah Tabrum '11 traveled in summer 2010 to the Harpswell girls' residence hall in Phnom Penh to help the foundation build an on-site resource library for students. The project, part of her Davis Foundation Project for Peace, was to purchase and catalog books and materials that could help students after graduation, including info on graduate programs and computer training.

"It's definitely an amazing experience coming from Agnes Scott to see education happen in a totally different way and being in a totally different role in that education," says Tabrum, currently teaching in New Mexico with Teach for America. "Cambodia is an amazing country to visit, and I've never felt so safe and welcome in another country, though I know that's thanks to the students of the Harpswell Foundation."

In addition to her library project, Tabrum also served as a "leadership resident" for Harpswell. She grew close to many of the Harpswell students that summer, including Dany So and Channsopea But.

Cambodia comes to Agnes Scott

In the fall of 2010, So and But arrived at Agnes Scott as exchange students for a year. The two were popular additions to the community and made many friends while on campus.

"Very few of our students, whether they're international or domestic, meet many women from Cambodia, since very few Cambodian women leave the country, much less pursue higher

education," says Jennifer Lund, director of international education at Agnes Scott. "Having these two bright, engaging young women present in our community has benefited every student, staff or faculty person who has come into contact with them."

Both say studying at an American university was an eye-opening experience.

"Many educated Cambodian people were killed, and it is really affecting Cambodia right now. Only 4 percent have a college or university education," But says. "Americans are very privileged to have an education. In Cambodia, we don't have a library with many books or many computers or Internet access. If you compare Cambodia to America, it is very different."

"In Cambodia, we can use the Internet for only about 10 minutes. When I come here—being able to use the Internet 24 hours—it's awesome," So laughs.

Harpswell students leave their mark on Cambodia

- Seven recent Harpswell graduates from the class of 2010 are now working for a prominent law firm in Phnom Penh named Gordon Associates.
- Other recent graduates are employed by various NGOs doing humanitarian work in Cambodia.
- In 2010, six students received scholarships for postgraduate study in the U.S. In 2011, five students received such scholarships.
- In the last few years, students have been first in their class at the Royal University of Law and Economics, the Royal University of Phnom Penh and the National University of Management.
- One Harpswell student, Menghun Kaing, wrote for the *Phnom Penh Post* during her fourth year at university.
- Another student, Leaphea Yang (now at ASC) was named student of the month by the *Phnom Penh Post*.

There is a great need to encourage and enable more women to further their education in Cambodia, So says, so that they, in turn, can do the same for other Cambodian women. "Women in Cambodia are told that they do not need an education. They say, 'You stay at home and take care of your family,'" So says. "There are not many women working in government."

Moving ahead

The Harpswell intersections have continued this year. Yuan "Sunny" Yuan '12, a student from China who spent last summer volunteering in Cambodia, served as a leadership resident in Harpswell's residence hall this summer, and in turn, Harpswell has sent another Cambodian student, Leaphea Yang, to spend this year studying at Agnes Scott (see sidebar, page 15).

And it all started with an author's campus visit, much like the many that had come before, save for a shared vision between Lightman and the Agnes Scott community.

"He saw something in Agnes Scott that had interesting synergy with his mission in Cambodia," Neiner says. "It's an amazing opportunity for Agnes Scott to be a part of these efforts to form meaningful international relationships and promote women's leadership."

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