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EMPOWERING A NEW GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS IN CAMBODIA
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LEADERS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD



Author Lays Foundation for Change in Cambodia

Ben Aaronson

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Concord resident Alan Lightman is the director of the Harpswell Foundation, a charitable organization dedicated to providing educational opportunities for disadvantaged children and young people. Focusing its efforts in the Southeast Asian country of Cambodia, the foundation is in the process of building the nation's first female college dormitory.

"It's been the most satisfying thing I've ever done in my life," Lightman said. "I've learned that if you're willing to invest your time, you really can make a difference."

Lightman and his wife started the foundation in 1999 out of a joint desire to give something back to society. The couple had originally planned to pursue the foundation later in life and had expected to work with disadvantaged youth in the Boston area. But their plans changed in 2003 when Lightman was invited to visit Frederick Lipp, a friend who was

doing charitable work in Cambodia. Calling it a life-changing experience, Lightman was shocked by what he saw on his trip.

"Everywhere I looked, people were in desperate need," he said. "I felt like I was in a boat in a sea of drowning people and I didn't know who to pull out first."

Cambodia is still recovering from the brutal reign of the radical communist government called the Khmer Rouge. In the late 1970s, the Khmer Rouge killed nearly 2 million people, including virtually all of the country's educated class. Cambodia is also among the poorest countries in the world with an average annual income of just 0. Because the country is so poor, most Cambodians cannot afford an education and only about 1 percent of the population will graduate from college.

After seeing the plight of the Cambodian people first hand, Lightman made a commitment to help and decided to shift the focus of his foundation.

"We were so moved by both the need of the people and their spirit. They really have a great degree of resiliency despite the terrible things that have been done to them," he said.

"It seemed like a once in a lifetime opportunity, even though this was not the time in my life that I was planning to do this," he explained. "Sometimes life doesn't go according to your plans, and when an opportunity comes along, you have to take it."

Last January, The Harpswell Foundation began its first project, building a school in the small village of Tramung Chrum. While visiting the village with his daughter, Lightman said all the mothers asked them to help by building a new school for their children. The only existing school in the village was made of bamboo leaves and sticks, which leaked and blew down in heavy rains. Lightman said it was important to him that the villagers asked for the school.

"I didn't want to impose my view of what they needed. When the local people ask you for something, you know it's something they actually need," he explained.

Construction of the school was completed in June. Last month, Lightman returned to Tramung Chrum and visited the school, which had been in operation for six months and now has 150 students.

"It was very exciting to see students in those classrooms," he said.

In December, Lightman's foundation began work on a second project, building a women's dormitory in the capital city of Phnom Penh. The facility is expected to be completed in July and will be the country's first female dormitory. Housing 36 women, the dorm will be available to female students from any university in Phnom Penh.

Lightman said the project was inspired by Veasna Chea, the foundation's principal Cambodian partner, who had spoken to him about the great lack of university housing for women.

"It became evident that not having a place to live was a big obstacle to women pursuing an education," Lightman said.

Universities in Cambodia do not provide housing for their students, Lightman explained. Most men stay at nearby Buddhist temples, but women are not permitted to do so. As a result, unless they live in the city or have family in the city, most women cannot afford to find a place to live while attending college.

Lightman said Chea is a rare example of a Cambodian woman who was able to succeed against all odds. Chea, 31, had had several family members killed by the Khmer Rouge and was determined to get an education so she could help her people. Chea attended college, but due to the lack of housing for women, she had to resort to living beneath the law school building, literally. All of Phnom Penh is built on stilts because of frequent flooding, leaving about five feet of space beneath the buildings, Lightman explained. For four years, Chea shared this space with four other students, and in 1997, she became the fourth Cambodian woman ever to earn a law degree.

Lightman said he hoped Chea's story of personal triumph is not only an inspiration for the dormitory, but also for her people.

"We want to have a much bigger effect than simply giving women a place to live. We want to select women based on their potential to be leaders who will work for change in Cambodia," Lightman explained. "We want each of the women to become Veasna's."

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