

The Cambodian Sisterhood

By Jojo Lam (California-Berkeley)



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Photo Credit: Nghi Lam

It is a hot, balmy evening in Cambodia. I am seated across from Sarea*, a 20-year old Cambodian student who believes life would have been easier if she were born a boy. I am reviewing an essay she has written on the faults she sees with her personality. Before she leaves, I give her a new assignment: "spend some time writing about your strengths." My hope is that she will see what I see, an intelligent, sweet and determined woman who will help many people in her lifetime.

Serving as an advisor for Gamma Phi Beta has always sparked something within me. It's the opportunity to see a young leader's gifts before she can see them herself. I did not anticipate that same spark would one day lead me to discover my calling on the other side of the world.

A year ago, I embarked on a journey to explore Southeast Asia. Three months in, I stumbled upon a volunteer position with a mission that sounded all too familiar to my former role as a collegiate leadership consultant – a leadership resident role with the Harpswell Foundation where I would mentor future women leaders of Cambodia.

The Harpswell Foundation was the first nonprofit in Cambodia to build women's dormitories in Phnom Penh, recognizing that a lack of

safe housing prohibits young women (especially the 90 percent who live in rural areas) from pursuing a college education.

In my four-month residency, I marveled at the similarities between my experience as a Gamma Phi Beta collegian and the sisterhood these women were living. Not only was the physical environment similar – shared bathrooms, a library, a hall for meetings – but so were the expectations of membership and its rewards – lifelong friendship, a support network and opportunities for growth.

There was a key difference. For many of these women, higher education would not have been an option without Harpswell. While Cambodia supports education today, some members of society still question why a woman would go to school when she could get married

or work to support her family. As a result, the students emanate a great sense of gratitude for their education and they take Harpswell's mission that they become the future leaders of their country seriously.

Luckily for them, years of Gamma Phi experience gave me a wealth of ideas to support their growth. Each student had her own story and goals, but the endgame was the same: help them question ideas and beliefs, encourage their curiosity and build their confidence.

The highlight of my trip came near the end of my program when a fellow leadership resident and I cooked up a soccer tournament for the students. On the day of the event, the Harpswell women descended upon soccer fields normally reserved for men and boys. The women became fierce competitors despite the fact that many had never played soccer before. Afterward, the women proudly posted photos on Facebook,

asserting to their peers a woman's right to play sports – a small but telling indicator that something had shifted that day.

It is those small shifts I now find meaningful. Before I came to Cambodia, I took for granted the experience I gained from being an alumna of Gamma Phi Beta. Now I see that all along I was getting prepared for the mission I am on today: to build young women leaders all over the world.

**Name has been changed.*

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