A PLACE TO CALL THEIR OWN

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The Harpwell Foundation Opens Its Second Dormitory in Phnom Penh for Young Women

BY JULIA WALLACE • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

It has always been difficult for young women from the provinces to attend college in the capital. Students from the countryside lived in pagodas and young rural women were largely out of luck. The Harpwell Foundation is looking to change all that, and in the process make it possible for young, talented Cambodian women to enter universities and colleges in Phnom Penh.

Conceived of and run by an unlikely benefactor—Alain Lightman, an American physicist, professor and critically acclaimed novelist—the Harpwell Foundation built its first college dorm for rural women four years ago and it is now home to dozens of young female students who would not be able to study in Phnom Penh without a safe place to live.

The foundation recently completed construction on its second dorm, a bigger and bolder affair that contains space for a conference center on women’s leadership issues and will be inaugurated this weekend in a ceremony that Minister of Women’s Affairs Lay Kantha Phavi and US Ambassador Carol Rodley are scheduled to attend.

About a year after Mr. Lightman first came to Cambodia in 2003, he met a talented young lawyer named Vesna Chen who told him that when she studied law in the 1990s, she lived in a tiny crawl space in her university’s basement because she had nowhere else to stay. Mr. Lightman was stunned by her story.

“She told me there were no accommodations for men or women attending university in Cambodia,” he recounted.

“This was not a very serious problem for the male students, because they could live in Buddhist pagodas for free, and some of them, their parents didn’t mind their getting together and renting apartments. They have those options, but the women can’t do that, so for the simple reason of not having a place to live while attending university, most women are blocked from higher education,” Mr. Lightman said.

With Ms. Chen’s help, he decided to do something about it.

Four years ago, he began canvassing the countryside to invite the best and brightest female students to come live in the dormitory. Room and board would be free, he decided, and tuition fees in the capital would also be paid in full for those who needed it.

The young women would also receive leadership training, English classes and intensive seminars on current events as part of life at the dorm. On top of that, the residents would also get free motorcycles and bicycles to help get them to class.

It sounded too good to be true, and the parents of the prospective students were, to say the least, wary.

“When we first began looking for students to stay in the dorm four years ago, no one knew the Harpwell Foundation, and the parents all thought we were a house of prostitution,” Mr. Lightman remembered. He had to return to the parents bearing a letter signed by then-Minister of Education Kom Pheng before they would trust their daughters to the Harpwell Foundation.

And though a lot of water has passed under the bridge since those first recruitment days, some things haven’t changed all that much.

“Sometimes people say that we live in an organization or a center, because they do not understand the word dormitory,” said Khoun Chanteay, 22, a resident at the four-
dation who is a senior at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

"Even my mom, she cannot say it—she just says sleeping room, or something like that."

Ms. Chanthy was one of this first generation of Harpwell girls. She is disarmingly frank about the often brutal gender calculus made by rural Cambodian families, including her own: "My family already had two girls—they needed another boy, but unfortunately I was a girl, so they didn't really love me," she says.

But once she started school and showed signs of becoming a promising student, she says, they changed their tune.

"My parents and even my relatives started to think that I was a brilliant child, and they loved me."

This was Ms. Chanthy's first inkling of how education could transform her life.

Growing up, she noticed that the women in her Kompung Thom village had as much of a chance to go to school as their male counterparts. But when she was in ninth grade, nearly
half of her female classmates dropped out of school to work in a garment factory because their families were too poor for them to continue. Traditionally, Cambodian families will often make great sacrifices to ensure that a son continues on in school.

When Ms Cheuny was a senior at Hun Sen Balint High School in Kampong Thnom, a Harpwell emissary visited, hoping to interview the school's top 12 female students.

"Are you afraid to be a spinster when you study a lot, because it's really common that working girls and women study a lot, no one will propose to you?" Ms Cheuny recounted of questions asked during her interview with the foundation's representative.

"And I told her, No, I will never feel that way, I want to study and pursue my degree," she said.

Now Ms Cheuny is at the top of her class at the Royal University of Phnom Penh and hopes to earn a scholarship to continue her sociology studies in the US. One day, she says, she wants to be a politician, a dream she has nurtured since she was 15, when her father took her to a stadium to hear Prime Minister Hun Sen deliver a speech on the take-up to the 1993 elections.

"At that time, I didn't even know anything about politicians," she remembers. "I just knew that being a leader could help people, and also that you have a good reputation—you are famous, or something like that."

This is an outlook that the Harpwell Foundation nurtures and emphasizes.

If, in her initial interview, a young woman says she wants to get an education so that she can make money to help her family, she is not accepted into the program, Mr Lightman and his associates are looking instead for women whose dreams are too farreaching, who want to get educated so that they can help Cambodia. Once they find those candidates, the foundation wants to give them the means to do it.

Soon Rabeasay, 23, another of the first generation of Harpwell's young women, says that she wasn't optimistic about her future before being chosen to live in the dormitory. She was studying at her local high school and thinking about becoming a secondary school teacher.

"Honestly, when I was a very small kid, I never thought about getting a high education, because the situation in my family was very bad and my father passed away when I was 6. I had difficulty going to school," Ms Rabeasay said.

But after being chosen to live in the Harpwell dorm, she says, her goals changed: "Now I hope I can be a woman leader in Cambodian institutions, to help women or to be an activist."

"I'm interested in continuing to help women, because I'm a woman who was whooping!

A visit to the dorm one sunny afternoon last month revealed an almost disconcertingly pristine dormitory. Outside the dorm's high gates in Phnom Penh's Boeung Trabek commune in Chamkar Mon district, the city streets were noisy with the clang of metalworking and the shouts of food vendors, but inside laundry was flapping softly in the breeze, and girls were prepping lunch, filling their rooms and paring a mango to share among themselves as they chatted underneath a banyan tree.

The Harpwell women clean and cook for each other on a rotating schedule and eat lunch together when they're not in class. They study English together and debate current local and world events. They lounge in each other's bunk beds to gossip. They call each other sisters.

On the day of the visit, a group of five Harpwellites who are slated to live in the newly built dorm squeezed into a tuk-tuk with Mr Lightman and set off to see their new residence for the first time.

The new dorm, which cost $300,000 to build, is located off a side street near the Phnom Penh International Airport toll road in a fledgling neighborhood in the city's creeping suburbs. The Harpwell dorm stands out like a beacon of sorts in the area, its trademark circular windows—which feature sparrow dancers designed by a sculptor friend of Mr Lightman's—are visible from afar.

They girls giggled the whole way there, butting easily with Mr Lightman about everything from journalism to dental care to Phnom Penh's signature stench.

Mr Lightman seemed to have a mental dossier on every girl's studies, her extracurricular interests, her daily commute and even the
At the dormitory, the new residents ooed and ahhed over the comparative luxury of their new digs—they'll still be sleeping four to a room on wooden bunk beds, but there is more air and space at the new site and new touches that Ms. Lightman hopes will help turn the dorm into more than just a dorm, including a computer room, a 2,000-volume library and the aforementioned conference center, which is filled with portraits of great women through the ages.

The girls seemed particularly taken by a tiny lotus pond, scarcely a half-meter wide in the dormitory's grounds.

"Look," one of them said wistfully. "We have a swimming pool!"

"Now I hope I can be a woman leader in Cambodian institutions, to help women or to be an activist... because I am a woman who was helped."

—SOON RAKSIMY, A FIRST-GENERATION HARTSWELL WOMAN