

Ohana gives Cambodian children a brighter future

As our bus pulled up along a dusty track, we looked out our window with eager anticipation. After a few hours on a bumpy ride through the Cambodian countryside, we were excited – and just a little relieved – to have made it to our destination.

Our group of 31 (six Ohana families and six Ohana staff, plus our photographer extraordinaire) had travelled from Tokyo, and as we shuffled off the bus into the baking afternoon heat, excitement rippled through the group as we looked out at the school we had heard so much about.

Then we saw the welcoming party that had come to greet us. Wow!

Lining the pathway entering the school were hundreds of primary school students, boys and girls resplendent in white shirts and navy blue shorts and skirts, and behind them proud parents and teachers. The students erupted in enthusiastic applause as our group wandered along the path, our two groups exchanging waves and high fives, and some of us attempting a sampeah, a gentle Cambodian bow, as we uttered “suasdey” (Khmer for “hello”).

These students were among the few hundred attending Kirivorn Primary School, a rural school in Koh Kong province, on the road between the capital Phnom Penh and the bustling coastal city of Sihanoukville. Thanks to donations from the Ohana community in Tokyo, the Cambodian school has a new early learning centre attached to it, Ohana Learning Tree, which will take 18 students.

As we made it to the end of the Kirivorn student guard of honour, we settled in seats under a giant canopy decorated with colourful streamers and balloons. Our principal Shelley and other teachers, kneeling on a mat, received a Buddhist blessing by two saffron-robed monks, who chanted as they scattered yellow and white petals. (Flowers seemed particularly apt for an Ohana event.)

We returned to our seats for the Opening Ceremony, starting with the national anthem then featuring a delicate Khmer dance from some older students and speeches from the school principal and local officials.

Then it was Shelley’s chance to speak. “They say it takes a village to raise a child; it looks like your village is raising all your children,” she said, looking out to a sea of students, parents and teachers. “To all of you who have welcomed us with open hearts and open arms, thank you.”

For Shelley and the Tokyo Ohana community, supporting a school in Cambodia has long been a passion project. For several years the Ohana Gives Back fundraising effort has been supported by the Ohana Parent Teacher Organization. The funds have found a worthy home thanks to Debbie Krisher-Steele, the mother of one of Shelley’s former students, who runs [World Assistance for Cambodia](#), which has led the effort to construct more than 550 primary and secondary schools in rural Cambodia.

Ohana’s contribution has paid for the Ohana Learning Tree classroom, a sturdy concrete building with wooden slats to help the air circulate. An ongoing contribution of at least US\$3600 a year will be made to pay for the costs of running the school, including supplies and the salary of a teacher.

With the ceremony over we connected with our new friends. Students from the two Ohanas played together on the slide and the seesaw in the school playground and parents sought creative ways to communicate through a language barrier.

The teachers from Tokyo led the young Cambodian students through games and songs, helping them to overcome some initial shyness to join in with confidence. Other teachers distributed to the Cambodian teachers the classroom materials we had stocked up on a few days earlier in Phnom Penh.

Children’s education is vital for Cambodia’s future, but resources are scarce in a country that is mired in poverty. Across a decade in school to age 15, spending on each Cambodian student reaches just US\$3,000, compared to more than US\$100,000 in developed countries such as Japan. This means many classrooms are poorly maintained, teaching materials can be inadequate and teachers are often underpaid. So it is sadly not surprising that just one in 10 students achieve the minimum level of proficiency in reading and mathematics, [according to the OECD](#).

Contributions like Ohana’s make a big difference to the life of students, parents and teachers. I wandered through some of the classrooms of the primary school, which has been funded since 2001 by Nishimachi International School, also in Tokyo.

I spoke to Chhorn Chanthai, who had been teaching at Kirivorn for six years. He explained that the school was one of the best in the district, because it offered an English and computer program that few others had. Many of the parents work

cutting trees in forests or as labourers in factories and are keen to give their children an opportunity to do something more, he told me. So, their children walk several kilometres to school each day to learn skills. As we spoke, some of his students approached, keen to practice their English with a foreigner.

Later, Shelley reflected on these efforts to give children a chance at a brighter future. "I believe that all children should be given the opportunity to be educated, no matter where they live," she said.

"I would love to know that past pupils of Ohana Learning Tree will graduate from high school one day and go on to university or trade school to fulfil their dreams. Being able to give young children a classroom to learn in, to socialize in and to develop a community from feels abundant."

With the shadows growing longer and a big drive ahead of us, the Tokyo group got ready to leave. We gathered for a photo on the steps of Ohana Learning Tree, the green T-shirts of the Tokyo students among a sea of white shirts from our host students.

Amid a fresh flurry of waves and high fives (and Cambodian students testing out the "high five/up high/down low/too slow" they had learned from Shelley"), we headed back on the bus. We looked forward to coming back one day, eager to see what would grow on the Ohana Learning Tree.



