

A Week in Phnom Penh with Cambodian Children's Fund

Reflection by JaQ and NiQ Lai, Aug 2017



Background

As a family based in Hong Kong, we have been supporting Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF) since 2011 and have visited them in Phnom Penh numerous times since then. In 2012, JaQ, on his 10th birthday, asked for his present to be the sponsorship of a CCF boy aged 8 at the time and they have been in email/skype contact ever since.

CCF is an incredible charity founded by Scott Neeson in 2004, which works with some of the most impoverished communities centred around the former Steung Meanchey garbage dump in Phnom Penh, giving them a hand-up to permanently break the poverty cycle rather than a handout for temporary effect. Today there are almost 2000 students working towards a better future for themselves and their families through CCF's award winning programs.

In August 2017, JaQ and NiQ spent a week in Phnom Penh with CCF, with the following schedule:

- *Day 1:* Half day with JaQ's sponsor little brother at Kid's City followed by sharing a pizza, chicken wings and cola.
- *Day 2:* Morning meeting with James McCabe, Head of CCF's Child Protection Unit, afternoon tour of CCF facilities including World Housing Community and Neeson Cripps Academy (NCA) High School followed by evening food program.
- *Day 3:* Full day CCF business review, including marketing, funding, sponsorship, volunteering, operations, IT, grants management, donor relations and various community programs. Eye-opening evening village walk with Scott.
- *Day 4:* Full day at NCA supporting teachers with sports activities and a course on online programming using MIT's Scratch software, followed by evening club class in robotics.
- *Day 5:* Full day placement as a teaching assistant in CCF satellite school and discussing life experiences with CCF Grannies, followed by supporting evening course in graphic design using Adobe Illustrator.
- *Day 6:* Half day exchanging life experiences with CCF students.

A Father's Reflection (NiQ)

Since 2011, I have visited CCF several times in different formats, with my company HKBN in a big group of 90, with my whole family of four and on my own for due diligence before joining the CCF HK Board. This time was by far the most impactful, as I could observe the time series of how CCF kids have grown up over the past six years and see with my own eyes how CCF breaks the poverty cycle for the kids and their families.

Another difference was the longer period of this visit, being a full week, which gave JaQ (aged 14 and now in US boarding school) sufficient time to better understand the workings of CCF and get to know the kids personally. CCF is managed as well or better than any commercial company I have dealt with in my career. My goal was to provide JaQ with a comprehensive overview of the "business" side of running CCF so that as he grows and develops his own skills, he will be able to see what areas he can make the biggest contributions. I wanted JaQ to see that it takes more than just "passion and a good heart" to run a sustainable operation like CCF; rather, business sense and knowledge of what actions in what areas will make the most impact are also essential.

During the visit, Scott invited us to join his village walk which he has been doing every evening for over a decade. Whilst I have been on the walk a few times with Scott over the years, it never ceases to disturb me how harsh the living conditions are for these people; however, despite the muddy sludge, there is clear hope. When we peered into a dark home that had a bright wall full of "best student" awards, Scott told us that the child in this family was now in university studying to be a doctor; within a decade from now, she will be able to lift her entire family out of poverty.

Right next to the village is the Rice Academy Primary School, very generously sponsored by John and Cammie Rice, abuzz with evening activity for the nightly food program. At the Rice Academy compound, all we could see were ear-to-ear smiles on the kids as they greeted us upon entry. The Rice Academy is an oasis of hope for the whole community around it.

In the past, when I saw dire situations such as that of the community around the former Steung Meanchey garbage dump, I simply fell into a depressing sense of helplessness. In working with CCF, I now see hope realized. Beyond food, shelter and education, CCF gives hope, and with hope, we are changing the World one child at a time.

As a family, we get far more from CCF than we give ... salute to the full CCF team for making an impact.

A Son's Reflection (JaQ)

Though I have visited CCF once before, my ten-year-old self was at the time oblivious to the inner workings of the organisation, and my memories of the experience are foggy. This year's August visit has been a true eye-opener in myriad aspects, but two points are of particular focus: my raised awareness of the breadth and depth of CCF's operations, and the radical change that has occurred since the times of hardship still clear in the memories of those CCF has empowered.

To the first point of raised awareness: Although CCF's main mission is to empower the youth of Cambodia through education, the organisation realises that in order for its students to prioritise their studies and break the cycle of poverty, they and their families need to be assured financial, medical, and physical security. CCF's implemented solutions range from a free medical clinic to granny sponsorship/support to student-run leadership development events to incentivising school attendance with free rice for the family. Over the course of this trip I have learnt that running an effective, sustainable charity takes much, much more than just funding and a goal, though both are certainly crucial. This holistic approach carries over to the organisation's internal workings as well: CCF maintains stellar donor relations and volunteer experiences, and through programs like child and granny sponsorship, helps build one-on-one relationships that sustain support over long periods of time. *(As a participant myself I would highly recommend becoming a sponsor if you aren't one already, not only for the financial and mentoring support you can provide, but also the emotional connection your future correspondent has to offer.)* However, though this holistic approach seems effective in theory, how has it played out over CCF's fourteen-year lifespan?

Now, to the latter point of radical change: Simply comparing with my own memories from the CCF of four years prior, I am stunned by how the charity and its impact has exploded. The now multi-story community centre includes a day care and kindergarden. CCF now supports a Granny Program, and two new satellite schools have been established. Students I talked with still remember scavenging for scraps in the garbage dump; this week, I watched them build robots in the Neeson Cripps Academy, which supports 350 high school students and is set to become a fully accredited high school in the coming school year. The contrast was even starker in conversations with local Grannies, who recalled not only the hardships of Steung Meanchey but also the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. Now, CCF student leaders help to clean their homes and bring them bags of rice. In the next few months, the grannies are enormously excited to be claiming their cultural heritage in their first ever visit to Angkor Wat! To them, their new lives are miracles.

In sum, I am immensely grateful to everyone I met this past week in Phnom Penh, and for this new perspective into the organisation. It has been an absolute pleasure and great honour to experience the incredible impact CCF has had on these communities, and it has been truly inspiring to share in the enthusiasm and hope radiating from every empowered student I encountered. I do hope my thoughts on this experience can galvanise some action to help the cause. Remember that changing the life of one student is still changing the world. However you choose to support, know you are making a measurable, positive impact.

Call to Action

With an annual running cost is around US\$9 million per year, CCF needs our support to function. Below are the of the three most pressing needs for CCF at the moment:

- 1) **Financial sponsors for University Student Years.** CCF is facing a “happy problem” in that many of the kids it lifted out from a life of scavenging the rubbish dump are now approaching university age so the coming years will see a big bump in education costs. A typical 4-year University degree in Cambodia costs around US\$12,000, equating to US\$3,000 per year.
- 2) **400 computers.** It takes 400 PCs to support the education and corporate support functions of CCF. Today, CCF's donated 400 PCs have an average life of 7-9+ years and are no longer capable of running the sponsored software generously provided by other corporate sponsors.
- 3) **Child and Granny sponsors.** Beyond financial support, these sponsorships offer enriching personal two-way interaction. Learn more at bit.ly/Sponsorship-2016

To support CCF, please reach out to Joleen Soo, Development Director, Hong Kong, Cambodian Children's Fund.

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Recommended Resources

- CCF homepage: www.cambodianchildrensfund.org/
- CCF Overview Video: bit.ly/CCFStory2017
- ABC Video Feature - Australian Story: Scott Neeson of Cambodian Children's Fund: www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmAYOnBXit0
- Credit Suisse Asian Investment Conference 2015 Keynote: The Story of the Cambodian Children's Fund: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ckox3akIKo

Photos



2012



2017



2012

JaQ, sponsor brother, and friend
(Left to right)



2017

JaQ, sponsor brother, friend, and NiQ
(Left to right)

Photo Credit: Scott Rotzoll



Sports Activities
at the
Neeson Cripps
Academy (NCA)



Graphic Design Class
w/ Adobe Illustrator
at the
Neeson Cripps Academy



Robotics Club
at the NCA

Photo credit:
Reaksmeiy Mab



Assistant Teaching
+ Activities
at Sambok Chab
Satellite School

Evening Food Program
at Main Community Centre



Sambok Chab
Cont'd





Dinner with CCF Team
at Black Bambu
CCF Restaurant

