

A Bright Future

By Katie Roberts

Two Singapore-based charities are changing the lives of Cambodian children in need. **Kuma Cambodia**, in operation for two years, has 40 children attending school near Phnom Penh. **Caring for Cambodia**, established 11 years ago, is now educating 6,400 children in Siem Reap. Behind these organisations are big-hearted people dedicated to improving the lives and future prospects of these needy children.

Kuma Cambodia, established 2012

"Changing tomorrows today"

WHERE? Takhmao, Kandal province, 20 minutes from Phnom Penh.

HOW MANY KIDS? 40, with plans to enroll 30 more in June 2014.

WHAT IS OFFERED? Transport, full-day education, three meals a day, quarterly health and dental checks, vaccinations.

PROGRESS SO FAR? Each child attends school full-time for three years (Grades One to Three). At the end of Grade Three, they transition into half-days at a local school for Grades Four and Five. They complete the day at Kuma. By Grade Six, the children will be full-time in the local system. Kuma hopes in the future to employ a social worker to liaise between the children, local schools and village communities.

AFFILIATIONS? NAPIC runs a free maternity clinic, a mobile health team and a free education centre for older children and women.

FUNDRAISING? Supported enthusiastically by United World College (UWC) Singapore and corporate sponsors including DFS Singapore, RS Platou Singapore and Agility Logistics.

KEEN TO GET INVOLVED? There's a range of ways to make a contribution; see the website for details.

kumacambodia.org

Andrea Naylor, a full-time teacher at UWC East Campus in Singapore, is the Singapore Project Coordinator for Kuma Cambodia, and was one of the key people involved in setting up the school just 20 minutes out of Phnom Penh. She became interested after visiting the health projects run by the Norwegian Association for Private Initiative in Cambodia (NAPIC) at the suggestion of founders Irene and Dag Rommen, whose daughter Andrea was teaching at UWC.

Andrea, a New Zealander, recalls her first visit to Cambodia; it had a powerful impact on her. "I had not seen such poverty, and I questioned why the children were not at school. Many children in these marginalised communities work in fields, beg, or pick up rubbish to help support their families," she says.

"When I returned, I spoke with colleagues and Irene about helping NAPIC to set up a school in the same area as the health centres. Through the support of UWC, sponsors and the local staff, we opened the school in June 2012."

There are now 40 children enrolled, with 30 more due to commence in June.



Before the children start school they are taught basic life skills and have their first health and dental checks. "Washing hands, brushing teeth, taking a shower and learning the daily routines of school – it's important that they master the basics before they start their academic learning."

"The dedicated local Kuma staff love the children like their own; they are amazing people who have a vision not only for the kids but also for the future of Cambodia. This year we are providing professional development for all of the staff. This includes the ongoing professional development taught by the Head of the Teachers College in Phnom Penh, advanced cooking for our cooks, and English for some staff who wish to learn it. In the future we would like to have an exchange opportunity for Kuma teachers to visit Singapore and spend time at UWC."

Every month, the guardians of the Kuma children attend a meeting about their progress, and how to support the children's learning at home. Life skills such as hygiene, basic first aid, and education about reducing domestic violence and gambling are covered too. It's also a chance to build a sense of community.

Visits from supporting communities are important. "In May last year, we took 20 five- and six-year-old students and their parents from UWC to visit Kuma Cambodia," says Andrea. "On one of the days of the trip, all the UWC visitors and Kuma staff and children visited the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. Afterwards, as we sat eating lunch, with the children interacting happily, I noticed a group of street children begging nearby. It was a powerful moment to realise that just 12 months back, these could have been the Kuma children doing the same thing," says Andrea.

What's next? "In the longer term, we hope that with their children in school, parents will have time to get work, and we can set up a vocational training programme for them. By the end of a child's primary schooling years we are optimistic that the parents will be better equipped to take on full responsibility for their child's education."



CAMBODIA TODAY

Cambodia struggles not only with a developing country's usual challenges of providing healthcare, safety, services and access to opportunity, but with the legacy of decades of war, genocide, famine and flooding. Here are some recent US Government statistics on Cambodia:

- Life expectancy is 63 years on average.
- 31 percent of the population lives in poverty.
- Children go to school for an average of 10 years, much less for girls.
- Literacy hovers between 60 and 70 percent.