



Young children in Svay Chek, Cambodia gather around for Papa Brian Bell, a Falkland resident who has been at the forefront of supporting education in the small village. (Aaron Hannah photography)

Vernon students show support for Cambodian children

Mission Hill is now a sister school with an education program in Svay Chek, Cambodia

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Over the course of its control from 1975 to 1979, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime claimed the life of nearly two million Cambodians.

Lead by Angkar Padevat, the unnamed leaders, the Khmer Rouge forced millions from their city homes into the countryside. Countless men, women and children were killed as the Khmer Rouge sought to transform Cambodia into a society without class, money or exploitation.

To that end, many of the country's intellectuals were murdered, money and free trade markets were abolished, and the school system was torn apart. Instead, children were forced to work in the rice fields to meet the government's high

quotas that saw many toiling in the fields for more than 12 hours per day without proper nutrients.

Despite the Khmer Rouge losing control after the capture of Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh on Jan. 7, 1979, the echoes of the Cambodian genocide impact many aspects of the country's current state and is considered a primary catalyst in the poverty that afflicts Cambodia today.

Cambodia's literacy rate among children continues to climb as the country seeks to mitigate the long-lasting effects of the Khmer Rouge's demolition of the school system and is estimated at 92.2 per cent, a [September 2017 article in The Phnom Penh Post](#) states. According to the Global Partnership for Education, proper schooling reduces poverty, bolsters the economy and increases the quality of life.

Brian Bell, a retired Falkland resident who has spent his retirement visiting and supporting the small village of Svay Chek in the province of Siem Reap, believes that more needs to be done.

"I discovered more need," Bell said, noting that more than 20 per cent of the Cambodian population lives below the national poverty line of less than 1 USD per day.

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After his second trip to Cambodia in spring 2018, Bell — affectionately dubbed Papa Brian — was approached by Chad Soon, a Grade 5-6 teacher at Mission Hill Elementary, who sought to make a donation to Bell's efforts after the Cambodia Support Group, which the school previously supported, ceased its operations.

Related: [Vernon concert raises awareness, hope, for Cambodian school](#)

Soon approached [On Ouchs](#), a Mission Hill Elementary alumnus born into a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand, about Bell's work and they agreed to offer their support.

"I told the story to the kids and they got behind it immediately. We know his heart is there," Soon said of Bell. "I'm happy. Whatever little bit we can do is something."

A Mission Hill Elementary bake sale raised \$430, accompanied by a donation from Ouchs and 40 pounds of books donated by the students, which was given to Bell and his partner charity ABCs and Rice — a Siem Reap-based charity that provides free education in English and Khmer and offers food programs to hungry students.

“That money all went with Brian to get the kids supplies,” Soon said. “It’s really amazing work she (ABC’s and Rice founder Tammy Pomroy) has done there.”

While ABCs and Rice are new to Svay Chek, Bell said the platform put forward by Pomroy is an effective measure for promoting both nutrition and education.

“The kids don’t go to school because they work in the rice fields,” Bell said. “(Through ABC’s and Rice), if kids show up at school they get a rice ration.”

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After the successful donation of their money and supplies to Svay Chek, Bell returned with bracelets for the kids and a new partnership had officially launched.

“We floated the idea of a sister school. I think it’s great for a school like Mission Hill, because we’re such a charitable school, to make that connection,” Soon said. “You see when kids get into service projects, their appreciation grows. The kids are seeing that, even as a kid, you can be focused on how to make the world better.”

Lilli White, a Grade 5 student in Soon’s class, agreed.

“We have a lot of things here that they don’t,” White said. “It makes me feel better that they have these (books) and a school.”

Harley Taylor, Grade 6, was heavily involved in promoting the bake sale and said it feels good to help those in need.

“We had to make lots of posters,” Taylor said. “Every day I mostly did the announcements.”

“I felt very generous,” added Carter Young, Grade 5. “They have no school. They can’t learn. They have no books to read.”

Ewan Radbourne, Grade 5, thought that if Bell could donate then so could he.

“I thought it was pretty good. I don’t know how he (Bell) got the idea to help people in Cambodia,” Radbourne said. “The reason that I’m happy we’re helping Cambodia is because they don’t have schools.”

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Through their new sister school, Soon said the children have learned Cambodian history in a far more engaging and supportive fashion.

“People in Cambodia, they don’t get a proper education because of what happened there,” said Grade 6 student Danica Schmidt, noting the Khmer Rouge genocide.

Amolak Mann, Grade 6, said the partnership has sparked a lifelong interest in service.

“I know it’s very hard for them. I want to try to do more. I felt kind of a connection, like something in my life like that, had happened,” Mann said. “We’re all equal. No one is different. We’re all the same – we’re all human.”

For Bell, it was heartwarming to see the local students, some of whom are considered in need, support others.

“Some of these kids (Mission Hill) also don’t have any food,” Bell said. “They have a food program because some of the kids are hungry here in Vernon.”

Soon said some students of Mission Hill Elementary, which is a high needs school, have first-hand knowledge of poverty.

“We have kids coming to school with empty bellies,” Soon said. “Breakfast is so important for them to get that start on the day.”

However, Bell said he isn’t surprised that these students have found happiness through giving.

“The reason I’m happy is because I have a purpose. I have a purpose that isn’t myself,” Bell said.

“It kind of feeds their soul. Maybe some of these students do feel hopeless, but they have the power to change. They can contribute to the power of others,” Soon added. “Just believing in your own self, it sort of spills out into all areas of their learning.”

Spurred on by his recent visit to Cambodia and the generosity of Mission Hill Elementary, Bell is hosting an evening of local music at the Falkland Community Hall Jan. 26 at 7 p.m. Funds raised through the evening will be split 50-50 between children in Svay Chek, Cambodia and the Mission Hill Elementary breakfast program.

“I thought, why not start a campaign to raise money for Mission Hill and the school in Cambodia?” Bell said. “It doesn’t matter who’s supposed to look after it. They’re hungry. They need food.”

For more information about Bell’s Cambodia efforts, the music night in Falkland or to donate, call Bell at 250-550-3977.

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