

A Riverstone /Cambodian Connection

Jake Stalker

How does a Rivo boy go from being an everyday teenager to being one of the youngest charity founders and managers in Cambodia within 12 months. This is a question I am asked everyday and feel great pride to share that in the 2015 Journal.

I was born and raised in Riverstone, by amazing parents Karen and Steve. I have one older brother Scott and the great privilege of growing up with my Grandmother May living with us as well. I had a very 'normal' childhood, attending Riverstone Primary, Riverstone High then completing my senior years at Wyndham College. After finishing my HSC with a result that allowed me to follow my dream of studying Business and Finance, I found myself with a new level of disinterest I hadn't experienced before. I had the world at my fingertips but felt like something was missing. As though I hadn't truly found my calling in life. I ended up deferring university and working at a t-shirt warehouse in Blacktown. The months rolled into the next and before I knew it I had spent 12 months working away without making any steps toward improving my life. This all changed though at the end of 2013 when I quit my job to spend two months travelling South-East Asia with my mate.

I was 19 years old in January 2014 as we boarded the Malaysia Airlines aircraft and headed off to Hanoi Vietnam, we spent weeks travelling north to south via car, motorbike, boat and train. We even had the chance to spend a week exploring the areas where my dad Steve was based during his service in the Vietnam War. However my life truly changed when we crossed the border into Cambodia. Almost instantly you could see the poverty levels increase, the semi-urban landscape of Vietnam faded away and was replaced with open plains of nothingness, other than the occasional basic house or roadside food stall. Our first destination was Sihanoukville on the southern coast of Cambodia. It was as late as 11pm or midnight and there were still countless kids no older than 10 walking around selling bracelets or fireworks to the alcohol fuelled tourists. Often they were abused, yelled at or simply ignored like they don't exist. I remember sitting there thinking as the kids played with our phones, or sat down to have something to eat, how unfair this was when the kids I know in Australia would be tucked away in bed or watching TV that time of night.

We left Sihanoukville to head to Siem Reap, where naively I thought the wealth associated with booming tourism would protect the kids there from such hardship. But in fact it was worse, many kids begged for money or walked the streets collecting plastic bottles to sell for a pittance. Mother and child would lie on the park benches as their nightly bed. Having spent so much time in Cambodia with the amazing locals, instead of going to Thailand as we planned, we flew back to Australia after having my perspective changed on life. I was back in a country that has so much, yet on a whole we appreciate it so little. I decided I had to do something to help.

Over the next few months my incredible family and I worked hard to set up my new charity, which I named One Step One Life. The name was chosen to remind me that I don't aim to change the world, I just want to help take One Step towards changing One Life at a time. We registered here in Australia and I set off on a few trips to Cambodia to make connections, learn and be inspired by existing charities and to discover what was missing in the charity world in Cambodia. Like so many people do, I found myself worn out by the over-complexity of many charities, the lack of transparency and lack of simply getting on with the job.



Jake and a German Donor sharing dinner with our students outside of the new school.



Pheakdey, Scott and Hayden on the road.

I vowed to make One Step One Life a charity which cut complexity, employed only locals and simply got on with the job. In doing so we have cemented ourselves as a pivotal part of the Siem Reap community and have achieved more than could have been anticipated in over 18 months since starting.

We have partnered with an amazing local man named Son, who taught English for free in a lean-to to over 65 students. Through our support he now has a brand new 2-classroom school to teach the kids in a safer, cleaner and happier environment. Numbers are on the rise and our students are getting the best chance possible at learning English to capitalize on the growing tourism industry.

In addition we have granted nine scholarships to young adults; seven for university, one for computers and English class and our final to a young student who is studying art. We have our own learning centre where we teach computers and give young people all over Siem Reap the opportunity to have a free place to relax and collaborate. We also run teacher-training sessions with qualified teachers from Australia passing on their skills to young Cambodian teachers.

This certainly would not have been possible without my incredible family. A special thanks of which goes to my brother Scott who did a 800km bike ride with another Rivo mate of mine Hayden Coldwell, across Cambodia to raise funds for our work. The One Step One Life committee is also filled with Riverstone connections with current and past local school teachers and many friends and family from the local Riverstone area. Furthermore a special thanks needs to go to all the incredible supporters One Step One Life has, many of whom reside here in Riverstone. Without your support and dedicated interest none of this would be possible.

Coming from a small Australian country-like town to Cambodia has been a huge learning experience for me. Here in Riverstone we have been quite sheltered from the growing aspects of Australian multiculturalism so being part of another culture was something that certainly took some adjusting. But learning about and accepting other cultures has become one of my greatest gifts and has enabled me to learn how to be a better person. It has been such a gift though to share my journey with the wider Riverstone community through talking at the local schools, newspapers and engaging all the time with the incredible supporters from the general public who follow my journey. In sharing my story it shows people, especially the younger generation, that although we are born in a small community, it can be used to lift us up and support us as we reach beyond our current realm and forge a path into success that is completely unexpected.



The school under construction.



A monk blesses the new learning space officially marking the opening in August 2015.



The 1Step1Life stall at the 2015 Riverstone Festival.

Pam, Sheryn, May, Karen and Jake.

<http://www.1step1life.org>