

“I USED TO BE THERE”

AS A CHILD, SHE WAS A SLAVE LABOURER IN THE DEATH CAMPS OF POL POT.

NOW, SHE HELPS THOUSANDS OF CAMBODIAN CHILDREN TRANSFORM THEIR LIVES.

Mark Halliley meets the remarkable Ponheary Ly.

“How much do you need?”

It was my opening question to Ponheary Ly. I happened to be staying in the guesthouse her family runs, not far from the country’s main tourist attraction, the ancient temples of Angkor. I’d been there several days as a tourist and typically, no one at the Seven Candles guesthouse had made any attempt to push the charitable foundation that operates from the ground floor and bears Ponheary’s name. That just made me all the more curious when I did get to hear about it. Based in Siem Reap, Northern Cambodia, the Ponheary Ly Foundation aims to give access to education to the poorest of the poor. I’d been told the PLF made sponsored food-drops to some local schools. I wanted to know how much a drop costs.

“How much do you need?” Ponheary just smiled and began to tell me how it all started.

She is a qualified teacher and a registered tour guide to the Angkor temples. In the 1990s, Cambodia began to open up after almost four decades of devastating hardship, civil war, and barbaric atrocities. When tourists started to arrive, often from the West, Ponheary took them around the temples nearby. It was a source of income, and a touch of welcome normality. But she soon grew alarmed at the number of young children following them when they should have been at school. Usually "run" by a parent a little way off, they were street-hawking or begging. It was all the more troubling as these kids were the poorest of



Ponheary Ly: “Extreme poverty- I know what it is.”

the poor. "There are the poor, the very poor and the extremely poor," says Ponheary. "I used to be there. I know what it is".

This is an understatement from a woman who as a girl experienced the full horrors of Pol Pot's killing fields from 1975 to 1979. In Year Zero, the Ly family were all sent to a labour-camp some 45 miles from Siem Reap. A high school teacher, her father vanished one day together with a hundred or so other fathers, never to be seen again. Four decades later, Ponheary won't talk in any detail about those days as she still finds it too distressing. But the rule of Pol Pot, forcing city-dwellers into despotic labour-camps in the countryside, taught her and her siblings just what extreme poverty means in Cambodia. They have never forgotten the constant hunger and desperation, slaving in rice paddies, dressed in rags, foraging in the forests for frogs, toads and insects to eat, seeing their loved ones suffer and sicken. No school, no security, no medicine, no future- no hope.

Their father had always insisted that education was key to their own futures. So it proved: Ponheary used it to reconstruct her own shattered life once the rule of Pol Pot was over. Seeing those truant kids track the tourists around the temples shook her, as she knew they needed school to stand any chance of bettering their lives. But trying to bribe them to go back to school was useless, as the parents just pocketed the cash. So then Ponheary tried to stop her tourists handing them any cash at all. It wasn't popular- we all want to help, right? On one bus trip, her party sullenly obeyed till one woman cracked and gave some US dollars to a young girl, who was immediately surrounded by a bunch of predatory kids. "I had to go back" says Ponheary wearily, "and rescue that girl from them."



A family home in Banteay Srey, near one of Cambodia's most exquisite ancient temples

Mostly hidden well away from the tourist track, Cambodia's rural poor often live in single-room shacks. Most have no electricity, let alone toilets. Even when the home is bigger, three generations are often crammed in together. Work is sporadic. Drought can force them far from home, sometimes into illegal jobs. The average wage is often less than 2 dollars a day. They've had little or no education. There's little or no medical care. Ecoli and other lethal bacteria lurk in the water supply, making disease commonplace; around a third of the population has Hepatitis C. And all this is still the norm: the country's rich are getting richer, but around 80 per cent of Cambodians still live off the land, often in atrocious conditions. Battling to survive, the poorest of the poor tend to keep their young out of school to toil in the rice fields and the rubber plantations. If (as they see it) they are lucky enough to live near a tourist attraction, they send their kids out to persuade tourists to part with some cash. How to break this deep-rooted cycle?

At Khnar primary school, around the turn of the millennium, Ponheary made her first attempt to do just that. Khnar is in the countryside about 20 miles north-east of Siem Reap. It's close to the exquisite ancient temple of Banteay Srey- a "must-see" for many tourists. When she first visited Khnar, it consisted of one very basic building, attended by about 100 children. It was under-attended, under-funded, under-equipped. Ponheary soon hit upon the first essential component for change: not money, but food. Good food. Because if the children were properly fed, instead of hunger weakening and distracting them, they might stick with education. And if the parents also got some food via the school, they might be happier to let their young ones study instead of working or begging.

That simple insight, from someone who knows what it is like to be a starving child, soon launched a mission that has grown and grown, consuming Ponheary's life, and changing the lives of thousands of children.

The Lys began to encourage tourists to donate to Khnar, supplementing these donations from their own wages as tour-guides. Ponheary laughs, remembering how her mother disapproved. "She said, 'Why? We are still poor!' I said, 'Mum, it is American money!'" The Lys didn't bring in junk food. None of the candies that tourists sometimes threw out of bus windows at the children, taking snaps of them scrabbling for sweeties in the dust. The Lys took in basic protein of the sort they all lacked so badly- parents, grandparents and kids alike. It soon had an effect. Children began to drop out less. Others started to enrol for the first time - all clearly with the support of their parents. Even those who'd never been to school asked to enrol, 3 or 4 years behind schedule. "When I asked them Why, they said, 'It is because we have you!'"

Fast forward to 2016. There are 360 students at Khnar. Pupils for the morning session all get breakfast every day. Afternoon pupils get a weekly food drop for them and their families. This "snack-drop" is composed of four packs of soya noodles, a can of soya milk, and a can of nutritious fish paste. They are allowed to eat one pack of noodles themselves but must take the rest home.



Ponheary's brother Dara Ly (left) and the driver unloading food at Khnar

The most deprived families also receive a substantial monthly food consignment, taken directly to their homes, often deep in the jungle. At school, the morning pupils arrive each day around 6.30 for their nutritious breakfast, prepared by two cooks on woodstoves. The basics of this, to prevent starvation, are provided by the World Food Program. The PLF top that up with meat and vegetables. In rural areas, only 40% of children complete primary school. The PLF say that at Khnar, the rate is 90 %.



Students at Khnar Primary School today, with a PLF snack drop

The food deliveries are part of the PLF’s Food and Wellness Program. Khnar has an on-site nurse, a water-filtering system to fight the toxins in the water-supply, and a special washing-area. Many students used to have sores and boils on their ankles and legs picked up on their walk to school- often through land full of germ-ridden muck. Those are largely a thing of the past.

Another major innovation: brand new WCs. To begin with, many would skip the school toilets and head off to open land round the back –that is what everyone did at home in the villages. But now they have learned some of the basics of health and disease-control, like the importance of clean hands, they tell their parents what they have learned.

As well as three new class-rooms and an activities room for creative play, Khnar also has a library. Students are encouraged to take out books on loan. They end up reading to their illiterate parents, who start to see how their children’s earning-power could be transformed by literacy. Ponheary believes there are really “two schools”: the institution itself, and another, more powerful one- the one in the family home. That’s where children teach their own parents everything from basic hygiene to the written word.



Khnar library

When the PLF was founded as an NGO in 2006, Khnar was the only school it supported, but Ponheary had other ideas. She had taken tourists further into the jungle, to see the ancient temples around Koh Ker, some 80 miles north east of Siem Reap. And there, she had seen



Deep in the jungle, the mysterious temples at Koh Ker

other children suffering from even greater deprivation. Many were dirty, sick, stunted, undernourished, and smelt. Their parents were often alcoholics or drug addicts. Their “school” had no teachers. And back then, getting there was time-consuming and potentially dangerous, due to landmines. Ponheary could not get government officials to take a look. Even Medecin Sans Frontieres turned her down.

In 2007, she persuaded Lori Carlson, the new president of the then recently-formed PLF, to visit and assess what could be done. Carlson was highly-motivated herself: inspired by Ponheary, she’d given up her life and career in the USA to set up and help run the foundation; she’s still there today. But Ponheary remembers how shocked the new arrival from Texas was by Koh Ker. “She said, ‘If we come here, we will fall into a deep dark hole and never get out.’ I said, ‘Lori, if we come here, we will not fall into a hole. We are already in a deep hole, in deep mud! We can get out whenever we want. My question is, How many children will you take out of the hole with you?’ ”

10 years later, Koh Ker School is fully-functioning- one of four schools on the PLF’s fulltime list. The foundation now funds and supports children and young people right the way through the educational system- primary, secondary, high school, university. All this with a core staff of eight, based in an office tucked away on the ground floor of the Lys’ guesthouse- four Cambodians and four foreigners, many of them in for the long haul. At each stage, everything seems to be thought of. When pupils complete primary school, they

are given a bicycle so they can get to their nearest secondary- usually much further away. Right now, there are 80 students at high school on PLF scholarships. They are encouraged to stay in PLF-funded dormitories with fellow-students so they can focus on their studies rather than face pressure from siblings or parents to stop. The PLF says the success rate of these single-sex “dorms” is an astonishing 100 per cent.

If they go on to university in the big city of Phnom Penh, the foundation helps them in every way possible, from computer classes to moral support. Four years ago, a would-be undergraduate named Chenda was told by her family that she should abandon her university plans and stay at home to look after her ailing grandmother. What will happen, she asked in despair, if my grandmother dies while I am in Phnom Penh? Ponheary encouraged her to resist, for the sake of herself and her family. She even promised to pay for a plane back north any time Chenda’s gran got seriously ill. Chenda has now graduated, her family are intensely proud of her- and her grandmother is still alive.



Sreynith Thai, PLF Field Director for Siem Reap province, distributing the Khnar snack drop. An IT student, she is from an extremely poor rural background herself. Her education has been sponsored by the PLF.

There are now 36 PLF-sponsored undergraduates on vocational courses at university. The PLF tracks them all closely. Ponheary has known them all for years. Among them is Soy Sen, a second year medical student. She recalls asking him why it was that he, then a 14-year old living in a small hut with his grandmother, wanted to be a doctor. “Because I want to heal other people well,” came the reply. “Why?” “Because my parents died without any treatment”. “Why?” “Because”, shouted Soy Sen, “no one came! No doctor came to treat my parents!” Now, she says with pride, “he has his aim.”

Of course, there have been failures as well as successes. Sometimes the pressure of extreme poverty still proves too much. Girls are especially vulnerable, even if they finish

primary school, as families want them to throw in education and prepare for marriage and motherhood. But despite all that, in total, there are now 2800 children and young people on the PLF's books. "I'm crazy!" laughs Ponheary, who is single. "I don't have my own children. I have other people's."

"How much do you need?" I had asked.

Now, I was starting to understand why my question had raised a smile. Every component of the PLF Programme has its price - a bicycle (for example) costs \$40. The scale of the PLF's work is vast. And the more it succeeds, the more money it needs. Currently, for example, the cost of scholarships to high school and university is rising so fast, it could soon overtake the cost of all the food supplied to schools and families. The accounting is transparent (see the website) and organisations including CNN and the World of Children have given the PLF the stamp of approval.

Ponheary's greatest hope is that, whether or not they get to university, her "children" stay in Cambodia, like her, to try and help rebuild this proud but troubled country. She's had to fight hard to win her own professional qualifications. In the 1980s, during the Vietnamese occupation that followed the rule of Pol Pot, learning languages like English or French was outlawed. She and her siblings often studied in secret, risking severe punishment. So it is hard to imagine a more credible motivator for today's young. "I struggled a lot to get my knowledge", she says. "If all the people with knowledge escape from the country, who can teach the next generation? If they all go, we will have to change the name of 'Cambodia' to 'monkey country.' Then, who will our land be for?"

One thing looks certain: Ponheary Ly won't be leaving. She's got her vast new family to look after, and it's still growing. She and the PLF are deep down in that dark hole, helping children and young people get out in increasingly large numbers.

For further information about the PLF, including how to donate:

www.theplf.org

<http://theplf.org/wp/2016/11/ponheary-featured-in-phnom-penh-post-for-world-of-children-award/>

www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/06/18/cnnheroes.ly.cambodia/

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