

The Gift of an Education

John Barrett '69
Volunteers in
Cambodia

"I wanted to do something meaningful and important. These projects have given me an opportunity to see many interesting parts of the world and have a firsthand, positive impact on the lives of people in other countries."

-John Barrett

The little girl smiles, proudly holding up two tiny hands covered in neon green paint. A young boy is fascinated by geography and wonders if he will travel to faraway lands one day. Outside, children link arms while running around on the sunny grass.

A few decades ago, these children would not have been in school. Today, they are dedicated students at the Cambodia Academy at Mongkol Borei, which is located in a rural area in northwestern Cambodia. The school provides 334 students with a rigorous Khmer and English-based

elementary and middle school curriculum for some of Cambodia's poorest children.

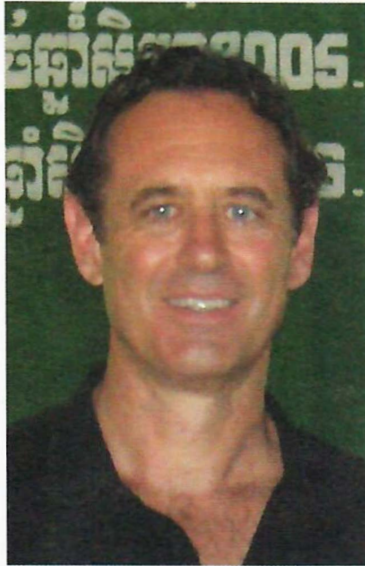
San Mateo Rotarian John Barrett remembers how it all began. In 2004, he and his fellow Rotarians were involved in the Rotary International World Community Service Program. Rotarians brought wheelchairs to Cambodia and Laos to assist amputees who had been injured in landmine explosions, and also to people who suffered from severe birth defects due to Agent Orange exposure. When they distributed the wheelchairs in the rural village of Mongkol

Borei, Cambodia, Barrett and Rotarian Hans Eide quickly learned that many children in the rural area did not attend school. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge era, most of the business people, educators, health care workers and religious leaders had been killed.

"Even today, this loss of talented people plagues this country and has been a huge detriment to its economic recovery," Barrett noted. "We were told, 'Many poor children don't go to school.' Although education is free in Cambodia, many parents don't have money for books, uniforms, transportation and food. When the children aren't in school, they work in the rice fields or fish in the lakes and streams.

When we got back, Hans asked if the Rotary Club of San Mateo could use its resources to found a school for the poor children in Mongkol Borei."

With the support of the San Mateo Rotary Club and other Rotarians, Eide and Barrett opened The Cambodia Academy at Mongkol Borei in 2004 for 50 children in need. Today, the students receive free tuition, books, uniforms, transportation and two nutritious meals a day.



"We're proud that our students in the academy have the highest graduation rate in the province—92 percent, compared to a 45 to 50 percent average for the public schools," said Barrett, a former mortgage broker. "We want to teach the children to be self-sufficient. "Our students are eager to learn and are excited about their subjects—math, Khmer (their native language), English, computer science, art, social studies and geography. We now employ 22 part-time teachers. In 2010, we purchased about three acres of rice fields and built our own school. In 2012, we built a second building, adding a library, art room and computer lab. Our hope is to possibly open a trade school in the future."

THE ROTARIANS' LEGACY

When Eide passed away about three years ago, Barrett and seven of his fellow directors from countries all over the world took over the reins at the academy. They visit the academy throughout the year to ensure that the school is running smoothly and that the facility is in tip-top condition. The energy is high when the Rotarians arrive, and the children form meet-and-greet lines to welcome their guests and express their appreciation. Some of the children perform native Cambodian dancing for their visitors, followed by a lively banquet.

The school operates on funds received from private donors, local Rotary Clubs and matching funds from Rotary



International. All donations are used strictly to support the school. Board members and volunteers are not paid, and they cover their own expenses when visiting the academy.

When he reflects on his time volunteering with the Rotary Club, Barrett said it changed his life. "I wanted to do something meaningful and important," he said. The Rotary Club's world community projects have given me an opportunity to see many interesting parts of the world and have a firsthand, positive impact on the lives of people in other countries. The Cambodia Academy gives children a chance to pull themselves out of the cycle of poverty, enjoy their lives and take better care of their families. Education has a huge impact on making the entire world a much better place for all."

If you are interested in sponsoring a student, please visit the school's website at www.cambodiaacademy.org or email John Barrett at john@cambodiaacademy.org.