

Greetings from ACRATH Western Australia!

Firstly we would like to warmly welcome Chloe and Joel Bond to ACRATH WA

We were privileged, at our May ACRATH meeting, to have Chloe and Joel come and share their experiences with us about their work in Cambodia over the last 3 years. Following is an extract written by Chloe:

At the end of last year Joel and I returned back to our hometown Perth, WA after 3 years of living and working in rural Cambodia. Returning back to Perth took a slight adjustment and having the opportunity to be able to meet with an ACRATH group here in Perth was an encouragement that people are dedicated and interested in the issues of human trafficking in our own backyard as well as what is happening overseas.

During our time in Cambodia we had the opportunity to share a role in managing a set of after-care homes through Destiny Rescue for girls aged 6-18 who had been sexually abused in their home village's as well as girls who were survivors of human trafficking. In this project Destiny Rescue works in collaboration with IJM, World Hope International and local police in receiving referrals for girls as well as working in the supportive Chab Dai coalition made up of anti-trafficking organisations in Cambodia. The girls that were in this project were unable at that time to live at home due to safety reasons and the after-care homes served as a safe place for rehabilitation, rest, counselling, beginning and continuing education, vocational training and preparation to return back to their own communities. The project is made up of around 45 girls living in 5 homes, 4 of which are staffed by Khmer married couples who run the home as much as they can like a regular Khmer family. The project also includes a primary school, sewing school and the much loved Destiny Coffee House where girls are taught hospitality skills, cooking, English language as well as Barista training and in end given employment. There are 25 dedicated Khmer staff who run the project made up of house parents, house mothers, counselors, social workers, primary school teachers, admin staff, a sewing teacher and handyman. All of these people playing a vital role in creating an environment that cultivates an atmosphere of hope, hard work and a positive outlook on the future and the girls' return to their community.

We felt that in this role one of our biggest responsibilities and constant challenges was maintaining and protecting the dignity of the girls we worked with. Given the chance to hear from them pieces of their lives, dreams for the future, singing their favorite songs and hearing their jokes gave us a sense that they are children and teenagers much like any other child around the world and not different from the children of our friends here in Perth. Understanding this helped us to let go of our stereotypes and labels of poor, foreign in nationality, low educated, traumatized, less fortunate children from a developing country and see the incredible strengths of Khmer culture, their ability to work at personal recovery and healing, dedication to opportunities of study and the richness in their dependence on one another in family and community and acceptance and love of one another. Quickly these stereotypes were replaced with names, stories and relationships with children who are just like anyone else - just simple people like us!

In our field there was usually a expectation to communicate the most shocking, sensationalized and horrific story with personal details of a child to get a reaction from people and to be able to provide a sad story and picture for people to take home with them. We found it our responsibility to communicate a message of dignity on behalf of the children and would challenge people to treat the girls with the same respect and privacy that they would give children in a school, foster home or children's home in Australia, America or their own home country. We enjoyed sharing this message and were always encouraged when the focus would shift from looking at a person in light of their story of trauma to instead looking ahead and being excited and encouraged about their dreams, strengths, hopes, achievements and plans for the future.

We hope to be able to be a part of ACRATH here in Perth and again are encouraged by the interest and work that ACRATH does in educating and work against human trafficking. Thank you for your time in reading this. Chloe and Joel Bond chloeandjoel@hotmail.com