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COCD - Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Winter 2016

Final Report

I had been living in Cambodia for 2 days before my first day at COCD. I could not have been more eager to begin! The jetlag was wearing off already, but I still had a lot of assimilating to do... Glenn, the husband and owner of the house I was staying at, graciously drove me to work on his tuk-tuk since I did not know exactly where the office was from the house. This act of kindness was so helpful in reducing stress on my first day!

It took me a week to mentally map my route to and from work. I found that the overall experience was much more qualitative and real by foot. Every day presented something new and exotic! I was constantly distracted by the stimulating environment that I could hardly blink. By venturing at such a slow pace, I was able to see, hear, smile and wave, meet and greet random individuals, and savor the overall moment.

On my first day, I arrived at COCD and was greeted by the finance manager who gave me a tour of the office and settled me into my workspace. I quickly realized that the work pace is much slower than what I was used to and I would have to initiate work to do.

My assigned supervisor was generally always busy, plus English is her second language. Though she could speak English well enough to mostly understand, it still presented challenges when it came to effective communication. Fortunately there was an Australian volunteer who had been with COCD for nearly a year who took on the role as my supervisor. She assigned important tasks for me to do and offered insight on how to deal with the cultural differences.

Most Khmer people I have encountered have found it so amusing when I speak Khmer to them. A big “Ohhhhhhh!” and then some question or comment in Khmer. Usually it is asking if I speak Khmer and then I have to politely say no, only a little bit. It is great fun though! I have been asking my coworkers, Khmer friends and Khmer neighbors how to say and pronounce certain things in Khmer. For girls, we say “cha” for “yes.” However, if one does not pronounce it correctly, it can mean “old.”

Many Khmer pronunciations are nasally, which has been super difficult for me to pronounce correctly! But I asked some Khmer friends if they prefer Westerners attempting to speak their language or just try to get by using English and body language. They said they and most Khmer people respect others more when they try to speak Khmer so I should try learning more! If I were to stay longer, I would definitely hire a tutor...

My “typical” day is like such: I get up at 7AM, do my morning routine and head to the office by foot (it usually takes about 20 minutes to walk to work). I arrive to work around 8:15-8:30AM, never an exact time, but never later than 9 AM without letting staff know (the staff preferred that I do not show up on time; it seemed to be a cultural influence). I work at the office until lunch. Usually I head to a walking distance Khmer restaurant with a few of the COCD staff, or I venture off by foot and have lunch on my own (because the staff always go to the same Khmer restaurant, I sometimes want something different than Khmer food). After the 2 hour lunch break I return to the office and work until 3-5PM, depending on the workload. I walk back home then it varies from there; every evening is different! I either go out with friends, to the gym, out to dinner with the “family” or stay at home and enjoy “family” company.

The #1 challenge for me has been respectfully living by the culture every day, but also trying to share my skills and knowledge through my open, extroverted personality. My American culture voice has been saying, “Do more! You are capable of so much more! You are not earning any tangible rewards or accomplishments. Push harder!” But then my Khmer culture voice tells me, “You need to be patient and careful. Do not push hard, because you will make others feel inferior and damage relationships. Relationships are more important than success.” It was a constant battle I faced every day.

Living independently in a foreign country stripped me away of the things I used to rely on, my cultural scripts and self-schemas in particular. I have learned how to behave appropriately in different contexts with Khmer people. For example, when to use formal vs. informal “hello” and certain body gestures to use or not use, etc.

I have learned that sometimes, my strengths I built from previous experiences do not help the situation I am in so I have to be open to new experiences to build new strengths to be effective in the situation. It is not hard unless you try. I have to keep reminding myself that I will make silly mistakes and I will be misjudged. However, I am confident if I keep to my instincts and continue to try [to be respectful] I will learn what I need to know, in order to be successful in Cambodia.

An important realization came to me while working with COCD: capacity building is essential when it comes to helping others. For example, instead of going into a classroom and decorating it beautifully, providing materials, and further developing it, it is more of our job as an NGO to encourage and guide the *teacher* to do this. In addition, it is more important for the staff in Pursat Province (where they are generally less educated) to take on responsibilities, rather than

the staff in Phnom Penh doing it (usually the correct way). Because what good would it do? These small, slow steps are SO critical for the overall development and advancement of Cambodia. It was amazing how I got to be a part of it!

The culture is a primary reason why COCD even exists – Cambodia needs a lot of help. Just within the first day being in Phnom Penh, I witnessed the corruption and poor quality citizens of Cambodia are living in day after day; and this is the capital city of the country! However, just because there is corruption and poor conditions citizens are living in does not mean they are helpless, nor hopeless. In fact, I have encountered many resilient Khmer individuals that are capable of making positive changes in their country.

In order to make positive change in Cambodia, citizens need to break away from their corrupt society's temptations and form more collaborative action plans. Due to the Khmer Rouge, many Khmer people live life in the present. They don't understand the importance of setting goals or having dreams, because for a while, their only goal was to survive the day.

Sabotage, mugging, abuse, lack of higher education and unjust tendencies are common lifestyles of many Khmer people. The Khmer Rouge's negative impact has long-lasting effects on the Khmer people. However, with the new generations, there is a growing hope. I have seen this working with COCD.

Even though the work pace at COCD was much slower than the non-profit organizations I have previously worked for, I understood the importance of me being there. I offered support and willingly accepted tasks. I feel I had the opportunity to share my skills and strengths with the staff and they were able to share their skills and knowledge with me in return.

My advice for future interns is to stay open-minded and mindful, but do not forget what you stand for. The most important things I have learned about myself through this experience is knowing what my beliefs are and standing by them. It is easy to lose oneself in a foreign environment where he/she is stripped away of all the things he/she could rely on to be continually reminded who he/she is; things such as friends, family, work, school, one's entire schema basically.

Since one is bound to go through a growing process while abroad, it is essential to be reminded of what he/she stands for and why. Then when faced with challenges, it will be easier to overcome them when you know what beliefs and values you have and why you have them.