

Weekly Newsletter:

Dear Bamboo Schoolers,

this letter will be a special one since we are one day away from finishing the school in Ban Khon Khuen.

How exciting this is!!! The hard work from our construction workers, volunteers, managers, founders and financial supporters is finally about to get rewarded.

It hasn't been an easy journey and to be honest, the last few weeks and days in the village have been simply excruciating and we are relieved to a certain extent that it is our last day here (mostly because it's so hot!).

The heat reached up to 39 degrees with absolutely no wind, then, on the days when it finally rained, the pipes got stuck with mud, meaning that the water wouldn't reach the tap and we basically ran out of water to shower.

Yet the heat has probably taken the best of us "falangs"(foreigner in the Laos vocabulary). I've personally lived in Africa and in the Middle East. I couldn't tell you if maybe this weather has been the toughest of it all since we don't have one single fan and no fridge to keep the water cool.

The amount of work that needed to be finished until the 31st of May has also been immense. We have been painting walls over walls, roofs, outside pillars and making sure to give this beautiful school its final touches.

Marco and Warwick even managed to build 2 soccer goals!

The construction workers have been up by 6am every morning, implementing the last pieces of the outside ceiling and are also more than happy to be able to return to their homes by tomorrow.

Their work ethic has been remarkable and impeccable. They have really gone out of their way in order to make this school as beautiful as it has become and have given so much attention to all the details of it.

Their qualitative works represents what they stand (and are) for.

Not only did they act in an utter professional manner, but have also become friends or even "family", since our construction manager considers himself to be the father of all of us and actually acts upon it. For example: The night I got stung by a scorpion, he was one of the first persons to check (after my scream) if everything was alright, although he sleeps further away from our house.

He always made an effort to note down new English words (whilst we noted individual Lao words) and was always more than welcoming with any new volunteer. The same goes for his assistants, Mr. Ngoi and Mr. Bhut (father and son). A huge thank you and standing ovation to them.

Furthermore, we were happy to witness the (small, but better than nothing) contribution from the villagers, who finally found the time to build the toilet (or basically paid 3 guys to build it for them) and clear the surrounding grass fields around the school. We provided them with water pipes, sand, cement, bricks and CGI sheets in order for them to build the toilet .

During these hard times we wished that all of the volunteers that have been here in the past, would be here to help us with the last bit and pieces (and to celebrate the opening ceremony) but just thinking of how hard they worked in the past, motivated us a lot to continue the hard labor.

I thought it would be interesting (for you to know) to ask our past volunteers what their most memorable experience during their time in Ban Khone Khuen was, and this is what Franki kindly decided to share with us:

"It's no secret how much I loved my time with Bamboo School and in the village of Ban Khone Khuen. We came across a few challenges whilst in the village, such as when the water pipes broke and we had no water to shower. Or when I was feeling ill and the food served in the village seemed to be constantly mushroom soup (the last thing I wanted to eat). Or when it rained and the mud stuck to the bottom of our shoes and made it hard to walk. But there were always solutions, and we took each challenge in our stride and laughed them off, as however difficult some times were, the village began to feel like home. The construction workers, villagers and fellow BS volunteers and staff were my main reason for this; their kindness, their laughter, & their friendships. I miss the picnics, trips to the waterfalls, playing badminton with the kids, showering surrounded by ducks and chickens... it was an experience I will never forget".

Our time, and contribution, in the village has been far beyond from only building a school:

I have to think of Silke, who taught a half-body paralyzed woman to walk again on her own. Her dedication (to give her physiotherapy every single day) and achievement will be remembered forever in this person's life.

It's nice to see this woman walking around with (only!) her bamboo stick, when all she could do before, was sit and lay down. Thank you Silke.

Klaus, who was a huge asset to the construction workers and even went up on the self-made wooden structures until one of them unfortunately broke and he fell (Klaus is very tall. German tall, but luckily he didn't get hurt that bad..). Thank you Klaus for standing at the construction worker's side at all times. They still talk about you very often.

Shay, who had the guts to stay for 1,5 weeks alone in the village without a translator, since she learned as quick and fluent Lao as none of us could ever imagine doing. During that time she worked as hard and the exact same hours as the construction workers did. If the lights went out, they used their torches to continue the labour. Nothing stopped them.

Franki, who endured the longest time of all the volunteers in the village and didn't even quit or want to go back to Nong Khiaw when she got very sick. Her spirit was always unbreakable and I personally admire her dedication towards this project since I am personally not sure if I could manage to live on these village conditions for 4 months.

Marco and Warrick, who just came at the end of this project and were therefore confronted with a lot of intense last minute work. They have seen how busy Sathet and I have been with the preparations for the opening ceremony and therefore always enquired if there is anything they can do in order to assist/ support us with these (Warrick will be the photographer on the ceremony and Marco will be assisting us with the logistics of things). A huge thank you to the both of them!

Especially Sathet who arranged all of the logistic for this, and all of the other projects, during this period. Not only that, but he also acted as the translator between the volunteers and the villagers during everyone's time here. We could actually not have much without his insight, his knowledge, his commitment and patience here.

His job is sometimes even harder than mine because he has to translate, interpret, arrange, organize etc. all the things that I cannot do due to the language barrier.

Not only that, but he always goes beyond his way in making my life a little bit easier here in Laos: like making sure that I don't get bitten by leeches while hiking down mountains during the rain, waking up in the middle of the night to kill a scorpion that I could kill myself but don't dare to, inviting and introducing me to the local people in Nong Khiaw in order to make me feel at home and much more. Thank you so much Sathet!

And last but not least, I would personally like to thank Doreen for giving me the necessary training and insight on this (and of course all of the other) project(s).

I always hoped to be able to do as good a job as she did when she arranged the construction of the school. I hope you like what your input has developed into!

Of course we won't forget our main sponsors Chris Pugh and „BILD hilft“, who brought this project alive due to his generosity. On behalf of the Bamboo School and the villagers of Ban Khone Khuen, we thank you for making this happen.

...and the Bamboo School team in Germany who were always there for me, guiding me since the beginning of my time here, Danke!

Alright, we cannot forget our nursing volunteer Pat, who bravely stayed alone in Nong Khiaw and Muang Ngoi and endured her task there with our translator, Sytha. Here's an insight into their past week:

" The beginning of past week we went to the Meung Ngoy village for market day. I saw a child who was brought in for weakness and was pale and found out he had a blood disorder called Thalassemia. It is a type of anemia where the body can't make enough hemoglobin and transfusions are required to stabilize the blood count. This child had received transfusions at least three times in the past. I asked if the child had gone to Friends Children's Hospital (where I volunteered for three months) in the past. They acknowledged that he had been seen there but missed an appointment, in February, to return for follow up. I knew LFHC had a monthly Thalassemia Clinic and most of the children with Thalassemia required regular return visits for blood tests and examinations.

I told the family that they should return to Children's Hosp even though the appointment in February was missed. I informed them that his blood count should be rechecked and we could not do that lab test at this hospital. The staff at the Meung Ngoy hospital did not know about the Thalassemia program at LFHC so they were thankful to me for informing them.

Several patients presented with high blood pressure and it was a consistent theme that they were non compliant, stopped taking the meds because they felt better and didn't think they needed them. The medical staff and I presented a mini presentation about hypertension and the importance of Med compliance and having BP rechecks. We talked about the hospital being open all week and at least every market day they could return for follow up. It seemed like there was some acknowledgement of understanding and next time I return I will keep an eye out for those patients.

At the Ngoy district hospital this week I saw a child with a very bad mouth infection due to a bad tooth. He had a fever and severe swelling of the left side of his face as well as trouble even closing his mouth. The doctor wanted to give him oral antibiotics but I cautioned her that this infection was extensive and IV antibiotics as well as IV fluids should be the course of action. I know that bad infections involving the mouth could get deep to the bone, osteomyelitis, and could do extreme harm. She agreed to my suggestion and initiated the therapy I recommended. The child was eight yrs so the treatment would cost the family. In Lao, only children five and under receive care free of charge. I suggested that after we gave an initial dose that the family could seek care at LFHC where care is free to all children under fifteen. I knew he could expect a high level of service there and was comfortable making the recommendation so appropriate, affordable care could be provided.

As it turns out the child had been to LFHC for a hernia repair in the last year so the father was comfortable and willing to take him. It is nice to know that the care providers do not feel threatened by the suggestion of referring the children to LFHC and often will ask me if a child should go for more definite care or due to economic concerns".

Every time I read Pat's weekly summary, I always appreciate her immense nursing input in the medical facilities here in Laos and into our organization.

We are so blessed to have her until the 20th of June.

I hope this newsletter hasn't been too long but it's not every day that we finish building a school on which we have been working for 6 months on it!!

Thanks again to all the people involved and we wish you all a remaining wonderful week!

Isabel Montano, General Manager