

Weekly Newsletter

Dear Bamboo Schoolers,

During the previous week we had the pleasure of welcoming back 2 past volunteers of Bamboo School who came back to Laos to visit us:

Ruth (accompanied by her boyfriend Stefan), who was the second general manager of Bamboo School from 2009-2010, and Lily, who was based for 4 months in Ban Hatsa in 2010 teaching English in the primary school there, came to visit Nong Khiaw and got a VIP tour through our house and showroom.

I should mention that Lily was supposed to be volunteering as a nurse in the clinic in Muang Ngoi during this time, but couldn't, since the authorities in Vientiane informed us very late that the new registration procedure would take about a month, and since she is only planning to stay for 3 weeks, her papers weren't finished on time. As compensation to these unfortunate news, I proposed to Lily to join me in the villages for our women's emancipation program introduction.

This project will be a very interesting one and is in my opinion one of the most important ones we will establish so far.

It all started with Layla, the General Manager of an NGO called GVI (Global Vision International) based in Luang Prabang, who wrote to me 2 months ago and wanted to get to know me and learn a little bit more about our foundation.

She and I quickly realized that we shared the same passion for our projects and therefore she told me about "Days for Girls" (<https://www.daysforgirls.org/>). This NGO works all over the world and provides handmade, certified, menstruation pads and kits to developing countries. These pads are sewed with special material that can be washed off easily and be reused for over 3 years. A menstruation kit comes with 2 shields that can be attached to the underwear and 7 different pads that can be changed into the shields. It's a bit difficult to get the picture just by written words; therefore I suggest you check out their website in order to have a more visual understanding.

When picturing villages in Laos one might think about the tough living conditions in these, or about the child labor that takes place, the remote water sources, the lack of water sanitation systems (no toilets or water pipes that reach the villages on top of the mountains like Ban Mok Eay and Ban Mok Leap) and the diseases from contaminated water and animals etc. etc. But one thing that doesn't necessarily cross our minds is how the women in these villages handle their menstruation once a month.

When Layla told me that when she introduced the Days for Girls (DFG) kit in one of her husband's villages, the reaction of the women were unimaginable. Most of them started crying because they never knew what was happening to their bodies once a month. Many of them even thought that they had cancer and would die soon, because of high amount of blood that they saw. One would think that girls and women would speak about this amongst themselves but it showed that not even the mothers of many girls would give them an insight into this subject-because they didn't even knew what exactly was

happening to their bodies. Trust me; I know how harsh and unimaginable this sounds. But unfortunately it is the sad truth.

So this was our action plan during the previous week:

Ruth and Stefan left to continue their travels to Vietnam after spending one night in Hatsa with us (paying for their stay privately), Lily and I had the pleasure of hiking up from Hatsa to Ban Hoay Loar. It was a hike that I had always feared a little since I had been told that it is the steepest and hardest hike of them all in order to reach a village. However, maybe my 11 months of intense hiking in Laos have apparently made me resistant to this "hardcore" hike - Lil< and did the ascend in 4 hours... We guessed that in the past there weren't roads that lead directly to Ban Hoay Loar once the top of the mountain was reached, and therefore concluded that in the past this hike must have been way more exhausting.

After reaching Ban Hoay Loar, we met Layla and her husband Vallie (who was actually born in this Hmong village). We immediately arranged a meeting with the head of the village (Naiban), who was literally thrilled about this idea and project. He even called the women in the village together to take a look at the DFG kits. Seeing the women's reaction (which for them must have felt like when we in the western world were suddenly able to watch TV in color) was overwhelming and very touching. Won't deny that it even moved me to tears, since it's hard to imagine how they have been dealing with this situation so far and how many uncomfortable and embarrassing moments they must have felt, not knowing how to deal with this matter.

The next morning we hiked to Gong Muang and Mok Euay in order to ask also here for permission to implement this project in December. Since these villages are Hmong and Khamu minorities, only a small amount of people speak Lao. Therefore GVI will be sponsoring female Khamu and Hmong translators (which the Naibans found great) to join us on the trip.

On a site note the Naiban of Ban Mok Eay finally confessed why the boarding house in Hatsa hasn't been used anymore. Apparently the teachers were stealing the blankets by the end of the school year from the boarding house, so as the children returned, there weren't any left. They had told the children that Bamboo School would be organizing new ones for every school year (which wasn't the case), and so the kids were left without blankets. Furthermore, the students were asked to pay 30KG of rice per year to the boat drivers in order for them to cross them through the river. 30 KG is a very high amount in comparison with the short transportation time. Therefore the parents in Ban Mok Eay decided not to send their kids to the primary school in Hatsa anymore. Not to tell us about this matter when it actual happened (we could have taken action then!) is typical Lao: Don't embarrass a sponsor by bad news!

Even though I proposed to speak to the Naiban in Hatsa again, they made it very clear that they will not be sending their kids back since the villagers in Hatsa were insulting the villagers in Mok Eay. Not the easiest task to fix.

The next day we proceeded to Ban Mok Leap and Ban Phonsana in order to ask again for permission for the project. It was remarkable to see how all of the Naibans (all male) saw the importance of this matter and were more than happy that we are able to help the women in their villages.

However, since in all of these villages there is usually one community water source (from our water tanks), we anticipated that the women would probably be ashamed or feel uncomfortable to wash their bloody pads in front of men and children. Therefore, we came up with the idea of building separate shower units, where they can wash their pads with a little bit more of privacy. This suggestion was highly applauded by all of the Naibans.

So: While Layla is busy resourcing about 500 kits, Bamboo School is preparing to join the WIG Bazar in Vientiane, where I will be representing our t organization. Within my next newsletter I will explain about this event and how it went...

Wishing you all a relaxed week, Nong Khiaw greetings:

Isabel Montano