

**These are the houses UWCSEA build**

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## Student reflections

*[Click here](#) to read reports, reflections and creative writing pieces inspired by the experiences of 15 of the 70 students who travelled in the Term 2 break on the Cambodian History and Service trip.*

'Voluntourism' is a term currently gaining a great deal of attention - not least of all for the awkward and rather ugly word itself. For our UWCSEA community, travelling to visit our projects is not for reasons of self-gratification or to simply 'do good'; rather it is to strengthen our partnerships with our Global Concerns projects and to develop our holistic UWC educational experience.

Why do we support projects in Cambodia and why do we take our Grade 8 students each year? Simply put, we explicitly link the History curriculum with our Global Concerns programme. Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge regime plunged the country into abject poverty. For the Khmers who survived this heinous regime, only some have been able to speak about of the horrors of the regime and of their personal loss. The international community did not listen to the atrocities thirty years ago, but our international citizens in Grade 8 listen. They listen to the personal stories as presented at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Cheong Ek Killing Fields. They listen to the personal experiences of the Tabitha staff and they begin to ask themselves what they might do if presented with the same sorts of adversities. They try to imagine their family's wealth snatched away and having to start again. Would they have enough resilience of the human spirit to be able to do so?

The 2012 Grade 8 History and Global Concerns Trip was the sixth time we have run the trip, and with 70 students this year it was the largest group we have taken. The group was accompanied and assisted by six Cambodian UWC National Committee scholars, who act as a conduit between their culture and our own (which ever that may be!), and also provide powerful personal insights as they also speak of their family's hardships during the Khmer Rouge regime.

***Why build houses in Cambodia when the Khmers are perfectly capable of building for themselves? Not only that, they can do it better.***

"We build to show grace to those who have not experienced grace; to those who have experienced great hardship and who have moved from social poverty to social richness and sense of community," says Janne Ritskes, the Director and Founder of Tabitha as she briefs the students. "This is not about you, it is about them. It is their turn."

Janne is right. All along, for our students, it has been about the families who have been chosen to receive a house. The students created frenzies of fundraising activities to fund all 40 houses they were to build and wells for the communities also - in total, \$52,000. It is a staggering effort and they were able to see first hand how necessary their work is. Our students struggle with the physical demands of building. Their hands are soft, they hit their thumbs, they find it too hot in the sun, they have to learn to do physical work. They work on

a house that has a bamboo floor size of 4 x 5 metres. It is home for the entire family. Our students are also surrounded by life in rural Cambodia. It is a view of life one does not get from the window of a vehicle. There are ducks, chickens, dogs, pig-pens and even stampeding cows around the houses. There is much dust and unseasonal wind. Rice is being harvested and the Khmer children are all involved in this necessary work. Very few children from this particular community attend school, but the parents have aspirations that this will be reversed in the near future.

After harvest, the fathers return and they wish to join in on the construction of their homes. Mothers have been keeping a careful watch for quality control of their new homes. Of course the Khmers' nails go in straight and they can use any blunt instrument to hit their nails in. They don't need to select their hammer carefully. Together our students and the Tabitha families learn. Together we build communities, bridges of understanding and safe, secure houses. Our partnership with Tabitha is sustainable and built on strength.

### ***The importance of a door***

After well wishes, blessings and our individual prayers of health, happiness and success, we walk away from the communities and allow them to get on with their lives without stings of attachment.

Although we have lost count, the UWCSEA community have built over 1,000 houses and sunk many more wells. The average Khmer family living in rural Cambodia is between six and eight people. The students noted that they know of the importance of a safe shelter as a basic human right, but it was an intellectual understanding prior to their visit.

As a final anecdote on the difference a secure house can bring to one's life, we met a woman, visiting her relative (a recipient of one of the houses we built) and she shared that she had received a house from a UWCSEA team two years prior. What difference does a home mean to her family, we asked? She replied that a house with a door has made all the difference to her. Now she can leave her children to do some tasks and know her children will be safe inside the house. It is the seemingly simple things in life that are important.

What else did we do? We sanded and painted a classroom block at Preah Sara Pech School and we went to work in five of our Global Concerns groups in Phnom Penh. If the definition of a tourist is one who travels or visits a place for pleasure, then it is true to say that the students certainly enjoyed themselves, but their experience was so much more than that of a tourist.

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