

Reaching Goals



VANESSA MURRAY REPORTS ON IRISH EX-PAT PARAIC GROGAN'S REMARKABLE JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY.

Paraic Grogan had never done any charity work before he went to Cambodia at the age of twenty-six in 2003; he wasn't interested. He went to the capital city, Phnom Penh, because he'd heard it was a wild frontier city with no rules, and he thought it would be a cool place to live. He got the chaos he was after: there was a riot in his third week there when the locals burnt down the Thai Embassy.

He also got an eye-opening introduction to the devastating impact of the wars, genocide, and totalitarianism still ricocheting through the lives of the Cambodian people today. Take your pick: the bombing and invasion of Cambodia during the Vietnam War; Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime, which imposed a cruel system of slave labor, malnutrition, and executions resulting in the deaths of what some estimates place at three million people; the brutal Cambodian-Vietnam War that followed; or the years of UK and US funded controlled chaos – again at the hands of the Khmer

Rouge – that came after.

'I realised I was very fortunate to be born in Ireland,' says Grogan, who hails from a farm outside Cloghan in County Offaly, completed a degree in Business Studies at Dublin's DIT Aungier St, and is now based in Australia. 'There's a social welfare system in Ireland; we've got free education and free healthcare. But in Cambodia there's no

'I realised I was very fortunate to be born in Ireland,

safety net. I was surrounded by people who have no money; they've got missing legs and missing arms.'

'People do desperate things. Sometimes they sell their daughters. They might get \$400 for her: that will allow them to feed their family for a year. People think 'how could they?' But if you've got a lot of kids and you're trying to survive on \$US1 a day, there's a good chance some of them are going to die. Local logic says it's better to

sell one and save the rest.'

So Grogan about-faced and turned his carefree backpacking adventure into a mission to improve the lives of the Cambodian children he saw hustling in the streets of Phnom Penh. Some of the kids come from families who have migrated from the country to the city hoping for a better life, only to end up living in shacks made of tin, wood, tarpaulin and plastic with no running water, toilets or electricity. Others are orphans as young as six living in fly-infested dumps, where home might be a plastic sheet held up by sticks. Every day they walk the dumps barefoot, scavenging for plastic to sell in the hope they can make enough to survive the day.

A lot of kids get addicted to drugs. The dealers are sometimes aged just 12 and 13; their customers are even younger. Glue is the only drug they can afford. Others have been forced into modern-day slavery and work in factories or brothels for a roof, a bed and a little food. The parents – where there are parents – are illiterate.

'They were young when the Khmer Rouge

took control of Cambodia, and never got to finish school. Finding food was far more important than learning how to read and write,' explains Grogan. 'Life is tough for the parents. They have large families, and they work for one or two dollars a day. Some of the men drink and gamble, and domestic violence is a major issue. But they want more for their children; they're desperate for their kids to learn reading, writing and maths.'

Grogan and a crew of other like minded travellers from Ireland and Australia called on the good will of friends and family at home, raised €5000, and built the Happy School for local children. Today, roughly 80 kids learn and play in a safe, colourful and supportive environment staffed by a paid team of five, keen volunteers, and partner organisations.

But the footy-mad Irishman didn't stop there. On a return trip to volunteer at the Happy School in 2005, Grogan set up Happy Football Cambodia Australia (HFCA) a charity focused on giving Phnom Penh's street kids the opportunity to play football in a safe environment with top class coaching.

In 2008 HFCA raised enough money to bring experts from the Inter Milan Football Club, one of the world's biggest football clubs, to Phnom Penh to run a week long clinic for 60 HFCA players. That year, HFCA also took five teenage boys to Melbourne to represent Cambodia in the Homeless World Cup (HWC), and funded a team of six to compete in Milan, Italy in the HWC the following year, 2009.

'Cambodia had the youngest and smallest teams in both tournaments,' recalls Grogan. 'In 2008 we really struggled, and won just two of 13 games. Overall, the team placed 46th out of 48. We improved in 2009, winning against Croatia, Japan and Spain, and finished 45th. So at this rate, Cambodia should win the Homeless World Cup in 44 years time!'

'The spectators and other teams could see we were at

Hieng Lim's story



Hheng Lim left his homeland of Cambodia in 1979, aged 7, and was relocated to Australia as a refugee. In March 2009 Lim, a lawyer and management consultant, returned to Cambodia. Today, he is living in Phnom Penh with his wife and two young children, working as a Business Development/Project Manager, and assisting HFCA to strengthen their roots in the local community. This is his story.

My parents, one brother and my 18-month-old nephew were killed during Pol Pot's regime. I fled with my remaining family: two sisters aged 20 and 17, and two brothers aged 14 and 12. We hoped to escape the horrors of the Khmer rouge. On our journey to Thailand, we witnessed piracy, hunger, rape, murder, disease, and death; it was happening all over Cambodia. It's something I'll never forget, and I'll never understand.

First, we escaped to Thailand. We were the first wave of refugees and there weren't yet any international humanitarian organisations present. We were told by Thai officials we'd be relocated as refugees to other countries. But instead they put us, along with thousands of other people, in buses and transported us to the northern border and forced us back into Cambodia at gunpoint.

We began the long journey back to Phnom Penh. It was unforgiving mountainous terrain full of landmines, and we had no food and no water. Our belongings were stolen immediately. Those who had gone ahead would poke around blindly to detect and cover landmines. Every so often one would go off, and human remains hung from the surrounding trees. Some people were forced to leave their sick and elderly behind. Mothers had to feed their children urine because there was no water.

It took us many months to reach Phnom Penh. We lived on the streets for 6 months, begging just to get by. Then we heard that the UN had established refugee camps along the Thai

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border, so we returned to Thailand again by hiding in transport trucks with about 30 others. We remained there in a refugee camp for 12 months before we were sponsored to relocate to Australia.

In Australia we just got on with the business of living; we didn't have much time for self-pity. My sisters went to work immediately, studying and working. They took care of me and my brothers, giving us everything they could to make our lives happy. Australia has been so good to us.

It took a huge leap of faith for me to return to Cambodia. When I left in 1979 Cambodia was a place where you could die in the blink of an eye, or just disappear and never be heard from again. Today, the city is thriving, but people are still trying to survive, and survival is about money. Life is cheap here; people can and will do just about anything for money.

I have many hopes for Cambodia. I hope the legal system continues to improve, and the government continues to work against corruption. I hope life will become more valuable and that children are prioritised. I hope it will become a place like Australia or Ireland where hard work allows you a fair and decent life.

I have hope for Cambodia because I see many good people and many good things that happen. The children we help at HFCA start with very little and do not get many chances in life. But if we can just make one life better, well, that's a start ■

Making A Difference

a disadvantage in many key areas of the game, but they were impressed by the players' passion and their desire to represent Cambodia. What they lack in size they make up for with heart; they got a great reception from the fans.'

Forty-nine year-old Jimmy Campbell has been coaching the HFCA kids since early 2009. A Glasgow Celtic FC supporter, Campbell has been playing since he could walk, and has played professionally in his home country of Scotland, and also in Australia, where he lived for 20 years.

He puts eighty or so kids aged between ten and 20 through their paces on a school playing field every Saturday morning. It turns dusty in the dry season and floods in the wet. Many of the kids play barefoot, and the facilities and equipment are a world apart from those Campbell is accustomed to in developed nations like Australia and Scotland, where he has coached at elite level.

'In many ways Cambodian kids are easier to coach than Western kids,' says Campbell. 'They have more respect for their coaches and elders in general here in Cambodia than in Australia and the UK. They're keen to learn and there are far less interruptions from kids seeking attention.'

Campbell is positive about Cambodia's chances in this year's HWC. 'It looks like we'll have a competitive team this year. We're not world-beaters by any means, but we go there with quiet optimism. Hopefully we'll win some games and play good football in a sporting manner.'

The players train hard for three months ahead of the Cup, honing their fitness, tactics and skills. During the week they're at the tournament itself, they behave like any professional footballer would: training daily, playing games, not drinking and ensuring they get a good night's sleep. 'Participating in the Homeless World Cup gives the players an unbelievable experience,' Campbell continues. 'It helps them improve as footballers and as people. Last year I watched some players really mature.'

Grogan agrees. 'As important as it is to improve their skills, the life skills they acquire are far more important. They learn



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about teamwork and responsibility. They get an opportunity to travel. Once abroad, they learn about other cultures which is great for their understanding of the outside world, and they're given a hero's welcome when they return home.'

Several HWC players from previous years are now employed by HFCA as part time coaches. They're part of a staff of around ten who keep the program running. All the staff are Cambodian aside from Campbell and another coach, Emmy, from Nigeria. Travellers looking to get more out of their time in Cambodia than happy snaps and hangovers sometimes volunteer as coaches.

Ex-pats like 33 year-old Alan Keehan from Limerick also do their bit. Keehan opened the Paddy Rice Irish Sports Bar and Restaurant (and soon to be hotel) on the banks of the Mekong in Phnom Penh in March 2010. 'This is a country in need of help, and being a sports bar, well, it felt natural for us to support a charity involved in sport, says Keehan. 'Paddy Rice organises pub quizzes and raffles, and all the proceeds going to HFCA. We sponsor a local football team, and we provide

uniforms for the HFCA team for their trip to Brazil. They're a great source of pride for all involved.'

What's next for the HFCA kids? 'We're working towards bringing Inter Milan back for a clinic for 200 kids in 2011,' says Grogan. From 19th to 26th September, a six-strong team will head to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil to represent Cambodia on the international playing field. But it's about more than football. The kids have been linked in with HFCA's partner organisations: the Centre for Children's Happiness (CCH), Riverkids, the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF) and the Happy School.

'The difference in their lives before and after they enter the programs run by our partners is huge,' says Grogan. 'Now, they have access to education, food, health care and job skill training courses. We're giving them a chance for a better future, and they're jumping at it.'

They're trying to get more girls involved too. Cambodian culture is not alone in treating women as second class citizens and viewing sport as a

male privilege. 'Some parents don't see the value in sending their daughters to school, so you can imagine how hard it can be to get parents to send them to a football program,' says Grogan. But thanks to organisations like HFCA, things are changing.

And Grogan? After his second stint working with disadvantaged youth in Cambodia, he returned to Australia and set about re-qualifying to work in the welfare sector, then worked on the Collingwood Housing Estate in inner city Melbourne, facilitating an African women's group and running football, swimming, tennis and basketball programs for the migrant and refugee kids who call its 20-storey high-rises home. As you read this, he is volunteering with Argentina's Homeless Football team in Buenos Aires, and will meet the Cambodian team in Rio for the Eighth Homeless World Cup, from 19th to 26th September. Game on! ■

More information:
Happy Football Cambodia Australia (HFCA) <http://hfcaustralia.org/>
Homeless World Cup (HWC) <http://www.homeless-worldcup.org/>