

BABY TREE PROJECTS

A CAMBODIA-FOCUSED NPO TEACHES VALUES FROM THE GROUND UP

BY KARRYN CARTELLE

THE TEACHER, MR. HILBERT, SAT IN FRONT OF THE CLASS

reading a story from the neatly written page before him. It was a sad tale of war, prison, death and escape composed by one of the 10-year-old boys listening intently. What made the story even more gripping was that the incidents were not make-believe. They really happened to Koky Saly, who as a 3-year-old in 1979 escaped the bloodshed of the Khmer Rouge and made his way to Australia.

After hearing his story, Saly's classmates approached him to express how touched they were. That's what started the boy on his quest to make a positive difference in the country he had fled all those years ago. Twenty years on, Saly's vision finally came true when the NPO Baby Tree Projects (BTP) was born.

"[The story behind] Baby Tree Project's name is quite simple," Saly explains. "Koky is the name of a kind of tree in Cambodia, and I wanted to start working with people from a young age." Saly believes that if he can reach children when they are young and let them experience the joy and value of helping others, these values will grow with them into adulthood, just like a tree.

BTP's long-term goal is to establish ways for children around the world to help kids in Cambodia. One determined 9-year-old Japanese boy is setting up a makeshift stall in Yoyogi Park, where at 1pm on November 25 he plans to sell 100 Baby Tree badges. If people buy them all, the money will be enough to build a family a well in Cambodia.

In the short term, Baby Tree's main concern is to provide children in Cambodia with a decent education, which in turn will provide a solid foundation for the country's future. Toward that end, Saly and a team of volunteers returned last summer to the province he was born to build its first school.



Koky Saly (right) and friends

With a hardworking team and local builders, the group renovated a derelict school that was serving six villages. Three small rooms had been used by some 200 children, some of whom had to be taught outdoors due to the limited space. After the BTP team had finished their work, the school had six good classrooms and a library, plus a vegetable garden to teach children how to grow their own food. BTP also established a breakfast program to help the many underfed students.

Saly will always remember the talented children he met while building their first school, kids who wouldn't have received a decent education without BTP. "During the construction time, we held fun workshops for them. One of these involved T-shirt painting," he says. "Vin, a 7-year-old, created these amazing paintings that looked like Picasso drawings. He had never seen paintings before—in fact, he had never even seen paint."

BTP's next school is scheduled to be built in December in a village called Beeyum, where four out of five children do not complete elementary school. Volunteers can join the team for one to six weeks, and each is asked to raise US\$2,000 towards the US\$25,000 cost of the school. If traveling to Cambodia is too much of a commitment, BTP also holds local fundraising events, like Dance the Night—Build a School, which takes place in Setagaya on December 8.

Saly may be focusing on education now, but he hopes that as the organization grows, so too will its range of activities. "We haven't decided whether our next project will be another school or an orphanage," he says. "We also would like to get involved with conservation projects."

With a lot of potential work to do in Cambodia, BTP is taking each project one step at a time, as Saly continues to give hope back to the country that nearly took his. **Charity dinner, Nov 28, 8pm. ¥5,000. Angkor Restaurant: 1F, 1-38-13 Yoyogi, Shibuya-ku. Nearest stn: Yoyogi. Dance the Night—Build a School, Dec 8, 6pm-midnight. ¥3,000, includes one drink. Chubby: 2-27-9 Ohara, Setagaya-ku. Nearest stn: Daitabashi. For more information on projects and fundraising events, email koky@babytreeprojects.org or see www.babytreeprojects.org.**

village voices

In 2006, 1,358 people in Japan contracted HIV or AIDS, and one-third of the cases occurred right here in Tokyo. **Tokyo AIDS Prevention Month**, which lasts through December 15, aims to help raise awareness of the disease by offering advice and screening with English support. Contact the Tokyo Metropolitan Minami Shinjuku Testing and Counseling Office at 03-3377-0811; your call will be anonymous. **Tokyo Minami-Shinjuku Bldg. 3F, 2-7-8 Yoyogi, Shibuya-ku. Mon-Fri 3-8pm (appointments 3:30-7pm), Sat & Sun 1-5pm (appointments 1-4:30pm).**

Join The British Embassy Choir of Tokyo for the world premiere of **Sounds of the Winter**, written by BEC conductor Steven Morgan. This musical will also feature the poetry of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Carl Sandburg and many others. Admission is free, but donations will be accepted for the Tyler Foundation, a Tokyo-based charity that supports children with cancer and their families. **Dec 1, 7:30pm, National Olympics Memorial Youth Center in Yoyogi. Dec 9, 6:30pm, Toita Women's College in Mita. Email bec_concert_info@yahoo.co.jp or see www.bec.ac for more information.**