



CAMBODIA

Lavalla School for students with disabilities

Cambodia is located in South Asia near Thailand. The Pol Pot regime and the Khmer Rouge are in the country's recent memory. They were the main players in a war which was characterised by the systematic killing of about two million people and the attempt to isolate the country and make the population one of slave labourers. This is where the world originally heard the term "Ground Zero". The country is still politically unsettled and dominated by conflict. Prime Minister Hun Sen used to belong to the Khmer Rouge political party and his compound, complete with helicopter pads and a personal bodyguard, is now the next door neighbour of the Marist School for students with disabilities called "La Valla School".

School

Lavalla was set up in 1998 by Brother Terry Heinrich in a villa in the centre of Phnom Penh. This villa had one of the steepest staircases ever seen – not very suitable for wheelchairs and kids on crutches. A new school was built in 2000 on a block of land 14km from the city. Half of the students are boarding students and the other half are transported to school each day.



Marists

Brother Terry and Brother Darryl are the Australian personnel in the project assisted by about 20 Khmer staff including seven teachers. Volunteers from outside Cambodia have been a feature of the school's operation. Recently Jacqui and Giovanni, physiotherapy students from Sydney University, spent a month at the school conducting physical assessments, training staff in therapies and inaugurating a recently built hydrotherapy pool. Australian school students have also been involved in immersion experiences - students from St Greg's at Campbelltown went in 2002 and students from SFX in Newcastle and Trinity in Lismore are interested for 2003.

Students and Young People

The students in the school are mostly disabled in some way. Many are missing a limb such as an arm, leg or hand, and some are in wheelchairs. Some of this is as a result of landmine accidents, but less so nowadays as the landmine clearance takes effect. Most now have disabilities from polio, cerebral palsy, birth defects and industrial accidents. The teaching staff at the school are also disabled. They are highly professional and bring a sense of community to the school - they are excellent role models for the students.

The students have to sit external exams, and work very hard to pass them. English is taught in the classroom as it is fast becoming the country's second language. Students have access to computers, but electricity is only on for about two hours per day.

They share their meals together with the teachers, and work together to maintain the dining areas and the grounds. The students overcome their disabilities by looking out for each other - what one student can't do, another will make up for.

Funding

Lavalla initially relied on funds from Australia mainly raised through the efforts of people in Marist schools. This money was added to by the overseas government and non-government aid agencies when they saw that we were serious players in the project.

