

Students Become Teachers During Visit to Cambodia

BY CHRIS AGUINALDO

Photos courtesy of Theodore Jaquith



HPU volunteers take a break with smiling students at Palm Tree School.

"Our goal was to make sure they want to stay dedicated in their education so they continue to excel. I wanted to be practical in my help and not just be some random American just showing up."

HPU POLITICAL SCIENCE MAJOR
RYAN TINAJERO

When James Primm, PhD, first visited Cambodia in 1997, his life changed profoundly.

He adopted his daughter, Samay, and brought her home to live with his family in Hawai'i. However, the faces, smiles and warmth of the other Cambodian children he met there always remained in his heart.

Over the years, Primm has returned to help the children residing at Cambodia's Palm Tree School. He and other volunteers build facilities and offer support to the staff, who toil in one of the most economically disadvantaged countries in Southeast Asia.

For the Hawai'i Pacific University associate professor of International Studies, his volunteer efforts have become second nature.

"We sit in a classroom and we talk about globalization—theoretical perspectives, historical case study perspectives. Two times a year, I go out there and practice globalization. I realized how much it changed my life," Primm says.

So why not share the experience?

In January, for the first time, he accompanied a class of 26 HPU students, who visited

Cambodia for a three-week study-abroad experience they will never forget.

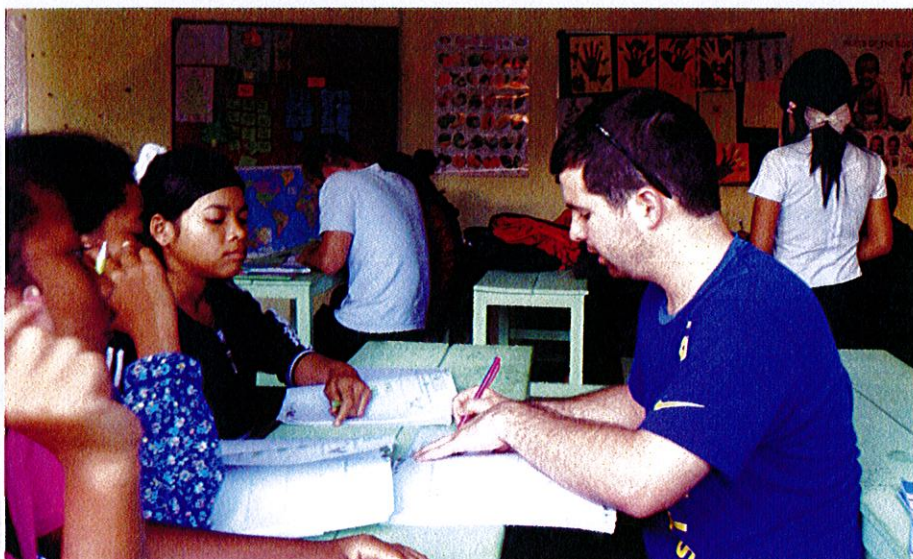
Through a partnership with Cambodia's Pannasastra University in Phnom Penh, HPU offered a winter intersession course: INTR 3900 Contemporary Nations: Cambodia.

The course requires HPU and Pannasastra students to add a service learning component to their studies of international relations.

Pannasastra University attracts students from the upper classes and is the only school in Cambodia that teaches courses in English, according to Primm. To team up with HPU students and visit poor areas helped the Pannasastra students "see themselves as part of an entire society, rather than just an elite, and that's a good thing," he says.

"That's an even better awakening for them because they're going to stay in that country and be the power brokers of the future," he adds. That future will include more youth who are better educated and poised to take advantage of Cambodia's developing economy.

The HPU and Pannasastra students worked side-by-side with each other and with aid groups on a variety of projects.



Business administration major Nick Monticello tutors English at Palm Tree School.

The HPU students' efforts were very appreciated, especially when they visited schools to help teach English.

"They became teachers and learners at the same time and I think that freaked them out a little bit, because I think they thought they were only going to be students. All of a sudden, in Cambodia they are asked, 'Can you teach me English?'" Primm says.

As a teacher, HPU student Matt Lau of Honolulu was teamed with Pannasastra students to work with children at Palm Tree School. "I was trying to teach the children English, whatever I can do to help their curriculum," he says.

Before attending HPU, Lau served 10 years in the Hawaii Army National Guard and had been deployed to Iraq. "Cambodia reminded me of Iraq a little bit because of the poverty," he says.

An International Relations major, Lau plans to enter the HPU Military and Diplomacy Studies graduate degree program after he earns his bachelor's degree. He studied Cambodia's checkered history in preparation for his study-abroad experience.

"It was so traumatizing for Cambodia in the '70s. You still see remnants of that and that's one of the reasons why they're so poor. The country is still recovering as a whole after civil wars," he says.

Lau learned that teaching English is very difficult, but there was plenty of time for fun, too. During breaks, the younger

children wanted to draw, play and enjoy time with their newfound friends.

"These kids have so little and when you're playing with them, even small things make them happy. They were grateful for the help," he says.

Ryan Tinajero, a Political Science major from Kaneohe, found himself becoming a human jungle gym while helping at the pleasantly titled Happy School. The Happy School provides free education to students who otherwise could not afford to go to Cambodia's private schools. Cambodia does not have a public school system.

"They would play everywhere. Sometimes, they were even climbing on us. I'd look down at my leg and there would be a child climbing up." Such joy amidst hardship struck a chord in him, he says.

"I actually got a chance to visit some of the kids' houses and I was just shocked. It was worse than reading about it in textbooks." The ground was visible under the low-lying plank floors, and roofs were thin pieces of tin, sometimes pocked with holes, he says.

He visited a family's home at which the mother, who had suffered painful abdominal surgery, could not afford her pain medication. Her limited resources were instead devoted to keeping her children in school. "She is sending her kids to the Happy School to make sure they get their education and vocational training so they can get more opportunities," Tinajero says.

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HPU INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS MAJOR
MATT LAU

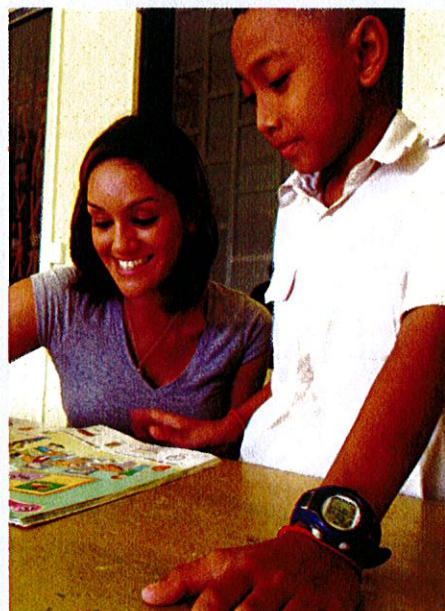
"Our goal was to make sure they want to stay dedicated in their education so they continue to excel. I wanted to be practical in my help and not just be some random American just showing up," he says.

He was gratified to learn that the people of Cambodia have an inherent sense of optimism. Even the children whose mother had surgery have a sense of hope about their own future. "They still know there are people who care about them," he says.

Both Tinajero and Lau say they appreciated the opportunity to study in Cambodia and would like to return to the country.

According to Primm, "at least a third of (the HPU students) has expressed an interest of wanting to go back." This demonstrates that they are on their way to becoming citizens of the globe "who want to be part of it, instead of separate from it," he adds. As a result, the course will be offered again this winter.

"I think Ryan and Matt see people who are just so warm and caring, who want to be with their families and do have laughs, even when times are hard."



Psychology major Dona Walpolo helps a boy learn English at Palm Tree School.