

John J Meehan

John J Meehan from Ireland made a significant donation shortly after ACODO was established. Without his support we would not have been able to move to our current location. John's donation allowed us to build the children's shelter and stage, buy the dancing costumes and musical instruments, various office equipment and a van for taking the children to school.

*At the inaugural celebration of ACODO on Thursday 14 August, 2008
John gave the a heartfelt speech.*

"I thank you all for allowing me to speak to you today. My time in Cambodia has been very short, a matter of a few weeks. But in that time I have seen something quite remarkable here.

I arrived here to teach five weeks ago. I was not at all prepared for what I found. I had no previous experiences of working in orphanages but my thinking was coloured by what I had read, seen in television documentaries and heard discussed about these places.

In the past orphanages in my part of the world had a history of being grim places, were in huge ugly buildings, whose forbidding aspect did little to reassure small homeless children. Well intentioned staff as well as children seemed to succumb to these surroundings and happiness just didn't flourish. Further, years of incarceration took their toll. They were places to escape from, not to stay in.

Then I came here and what I found was so far from what I had imagined. For a start the children were happy. Big smiles, cheerful greetings and an air of contentment. And it wasn't down to some big special occasion that might give the children a lift, make them happy for a day or two, like a holiday or a festival. A week later I realized that their happiness was permanent. And it was great to see such happiness.

In the initial period I was mainly dealing with the children. I did not have much to do with those responsible for that happiness, the ACODO members. So it took me a little while longer to fully understand what it was taking in terms of sheer effort to create that happiness. I did not know about the 17 hour-days, about working without a break since January 1st, no Saturdays or Sundays off since then. I didn't know about doing all this without pay, totally selflessly, solely for the good of the orphans. It was far beyond anything I had ever experienced.

What was equally astounding was how the eight people in this totally dedicated group, which is now known as ACODO, could rise above their tiredness, the strain of what they were doing and the lack of finance to create a unique environment, unique for the orphans in its security and happiness.

There are other staff besides ACODO members and other students, not orphans, who come here to learn languages, and who benefit from being here. Fine young people ranging in age from teens to mid-twenties, whose work ethos and good humour make teaching really enjoyable. If the future of Cambodia is in their hands then it bodes well for this country. I have

watched students and teachers interact both in and out of class, and the mutual respect and level of understanding is inspiring. At times it's more like being on a university campus than

being in a school, such is the level of maturity. And if ACODO can in such a short space of time create such excellence then it deserves all the support we can give it.

And back to those teachers. I have personally been helped so much by several teachers here that were I getting paid, they would be much more entitled than me to my pay.

But all of us, orphans, other students and teachers have been touched by whatever it is ACODO has generated by their own commitment and selflessness. It's more than a little humbling to come upon action so unworldly, so unconcerned with a lot of what we think is important. And to see the benefits such generosity and greatness of spirit gives to those orphans and students lucky enough to be here. And for anybody who thinks I'm overstating the case for ACODO then COME HERE AND SEE FOR YOURSELVES. It may verge on the unbelievable but it's happening, and it can be observed.

Personally it has been a role reversal situation. I came here to teach but I'm the one who is learning. Learning about how a small number of exceptional people can so transform the lives of so many. We can't match ACODO's level of commitment and selflessness but we can ensure that it continues. ACODO is looking after the less fortunate members of our society, those we all have a duty to care for.

ACODO is doing our share of that work. The least we can do is support them, help them to carry what should be our load too.

In the first step, ACODO has 54 orphans and 3 disabled people, but now there are 57 orphans and disabled people who are staying in ACODO. They are taught English, Khmer traditional dancing and Khmer literature at state school every day. 1450 students are studying foreign languages on a part-time basis from 6 am to 8 pm in ACODO. All of them have been taught and trained according to the programmes of ACODO. The orphans and the disabled are very happy to stay here and they don't want to leave here because it is a peaceful orphanage. The students also prefer to study here free of charge, but they make a small donation to ACODO to support many children."

John J. Meehan
14th August 2008