

Why has Phymean been nominated?

Child Rights Hero Nominee • Pages 32–51

Phymean Noun

Phymean Noun has been nominated for the 2015 World's Children's Prize for her thirteen-year struggle for the children who scavenge garbage dumps in Cambodia, and their right to education.

When Phymean was little, all education was banned in Cambodia, and her whole family was at risk of being killed. She dreamed of being able to go to school one day, and in the end she did manage to get an education. When Phymean realised that there are still children in Cambodia who have to fight for their lives, she quit her well-paid job to help them. The children that she helps live in the garbage dumps and slums of the capital city, Phnom Penh. They risk their lives by working as waste pickers, and many children have lost their lives through being run over by garbage trucks or being buried alive in the mountains of trash. Phymean fights for children to be able to go to school, and for their basic rights to be fulfilled. With her organization, People Improvement Organization (PIO), she has built three schools and children's homes next to the garbage dumps and slums. Over a thousand children go to school there, and get food, water and healthcare. PIO also provides vocational training and support to families.



The stench of garbage makes Phymean feel sick the first time she visits the children on the garbage dump in Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh. They don't have shoes or clean water, and they live under canvas among the mud and trash. But although the children have nothing, the thing they want most of all is education.

Phymean knows exactly how the children on the garbage dump feel. When her mother Malis died, Phymean promised her that she would keep up the fight. She was 15 years old, and she was fighting to get herself an education and to feed herself and her little niece Malyda. Phymean remembers every day of hard work and fear. So the first time she meets the children on the garbage dump, she goes straight back into town and quits her office job.

“As long as children live among trash, I cannot sit

back and do nothing. Nobody ever helped me, but now I want to help them.”

Out of the city

Phymean's story begins in April 1975, when she is four years old. Soldiers in black uniforms appear in town. They wave their weapons and say that everyone has to leave the town.

“Only for three days,” they say, “and then you can all come home again.” Phymean's mother and father don't pack anything, just some food and a motorized bike.

The roads are so full that

it's hard to get anywhere. The soldiers drive them out, further and further away. Something isn't right.

They hear gunshots in the distance. Anyone who tries to turn back is being shot.

The soldiers have tricked them. They are not going to be allowed to return home.

Mother has to lie

Phymean's story begins in April 1975, when she is four years old. Soldiers in black uniforms appear in town. They wave their weapons and say that everyone has to leave the town.



Phymean, who is standing nearest to her mother, is only two years old here in 1973 and the family has not yet been forced to leave their home.

The roads are so full that it's hard to get anywhere. The soldiers drive them out, further and further away. Something isn't right.

They hear gunshots in the distance. Anyone who tries to turn back is being shot.

Once they have walked for many days, they are allowed to stop at a large farm. They are given black clothes and shoes made from car tyres. That is the uniform that the Khmer Rouge want everyone to wear. The Khmer Rouge is

the name of the armed group that has taken over in Cambodia. Phymean's mother is very watchful. She has heard that they don't like people who have an education. Phymean's mother is not just well educated, she has been to university in France. Nobody must find out.

That's why Phymean's mother lies. She says that she can't read, and that she grew

up on a farm. She jokes with the soldiers, saying that she can fix their clothes.

So the soldiers believe her. Many of the black-clothed soldiers with huge weapons are only ten or twelve years old. They like Phymean's mother and when she pleads with them not to send Phymean and her big sister Hengleap to the camp where children live without their

parents, they allow them to stay.

All relatives killed

Phymean is almost always hungry. The only time she feels full for a short time is when her mother catches a fish in the river and cooks it on a secret fire under one of the beds in the middle of the

Cambodia's terrible history

Cambodia is one of the world's poorest countries and it has a terrible history. 40 years ago, the country was taken over by the violent Khmer Rouge and their leader Pol Pot. In the 3 years, 8 months and 20 days that the Khmer Rouge were in charge of the country, over 1.8 million people died from torture, execution, illness, famine and exhaustion. When the regime fell, there were hardly any teachers, doctors, writers or other educated people left. That's why it is taking a long time for Cambodia to rebuild itself and overcome poverty.





Phymean and PIO want to

- Help children find their dreams: Many of the children on the garbage dump don't have faith in the future. At school, Phymean and the teachers encourage the children to have dreams and to develop their interests.
- Give children hope: By seeing the children's progress and creating opportunities for them to display their talents, Phymean and the teachers show that the children's situations can change.
- Give children love they can depend upon: Phymean and PIO stay in touch with the children for many years. "They are like my own children," says Phymean. "I want to see them be successful and happy."

People Improvement Organization's work for children

- Three schools at the old garbage dump and in the Phnom Penh slums.
- Education in Khmer and English, focusing on languages and IT.
- A children's home, where orphaned and abandoned children can grow up in a safe environment.
- Support for families so that they can send their children, especially their daughters, to school.
- Clean water for all the children in the school, and the children and adults in the area.
- Vocational training for teenagers, for example, in hairdressing or tailoring.
- Access to nurses, doctors and dentists.



All the children who Phymean meets on the garbage dump long to be able to go to school.

night. There is so much that is dangerous. Asking questions, making mistakes, going to the wrong place, being hungry or being tired.

One day, her mother looks grey and her eyes look blank. She has just found out that all of her eleven siblings, who were doctors, lawyers, police officers and teachers, are dead. Their whole families have been killed by the Khmer Rouge.

Death penalty

Phymean turns six, but she can't start school. The Khmer

Rouge have banned all schools and all books.

Phymean's job is pumping water, and her father is worried that the work exhausts her. He takes the motor from the motorized bicycle that they brought from their town, and converts it into a pump. It provides water for the whole farm, and everyone admires Phymean's father for being such a skilled mechanic.

But one of the village leaders is jealous. He doesn't like the admiration that Phymean's father is getting, or the fact that his family hasn't been

split up. He goes to the highest leader and tells him that Phymean's father has killed and eaten a chicken. This is a serious crime when there is such a shortage of food.

The soldiers drag Phymean's father from the house. One glance at her mother's wild-eyed look tells Phymean that this is really big trouble. The soldiers torture her father until he confesses to eating the chicken, even though this is a lie.

The punishment for this crime is death. Not only for Phymean's father, but for her mother, her big sister, and Phymean herself.

The soldiers do not kill them. But the fear remains, and it is stronger than ever.

Arrival of the Vietnamese

One day, when Phymean is eight years old, she hears bombs in the distance. The Vietnamese are coming.

"Hurry!" says her mother, pushing them towards a corner of the garden.



There is an underground room there, with food and blankets. Phymean has never seen it before. Her mother dug it in secret and wove a bamboo door to make it invisible among the greenery of the garden. They sleep in the underground room for a week.

When the Vietnamese soldiers come, Phymean's father emerges. He speaks Vietnamese. He becomes the Vietnamese army's translator, and the whole family get a lift in a tank back to their hometown.

As they depart, Phymean throws her head back and shouts, "We have a car! We're going home!"

School, finally

At the age of nine, Phymean finally gets to start school. She wants to read every book in the whole world, and she quickly moves up from Year 2 to Year 4 to Year 7.

The Vietnamese leaders appoint Phymean's father as Mayor of the province, but her mother doesn't think he should be following their

orders. The killing continues – but now he's the one in charge.

"You have to put a stop to this. I can't live with a man who sends his fellow humans to their deaths," her mother says.

But her father doesn't want to leave his job. Instead, he leaves the family.

Mother falls ill

They manage fine. They have a motorbike, a sewing machine, two bikes, a house and furniture. But when Phymean turns thirteen, everything changes again. Her sister Hengleap runs away to Thailand leaving a newborn daughter, Malyda, who wouldn't have survived the dangerous journey through the jungle.

Soon after that, Phymean's mother falls seriously ill. Although many years have passed, there are still no doctors in Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge killed all the doctors, as well as the teachers who could have trained new doctors.

Phymean has to work hard to take care of her mother and her baby niece. One by one, she sells their belongings.

"You have to go to school," says her mother in a weak voice.

But Phymean doesn't want to leave her, not even for school, which she loves.

"Yes," says her mother, "you have to get an education. Knowledge is the key to a better life. Money and things – people can take those away from you. But nobody can steal your knowledge."

Every evening, Phymean holds her mother tight. One evening, her mother whispers:

"Hold on tight to your dreams, Phymean. You are capable of achieving whatever you set out to do."

Then her mother dies.

Alone with a niece

Now Phymean is alone in the world. She has been through many terrible experiences, but never in her life has she



Finds from the garbage dump are sorted for selling.

School became torture chamber

The Khmer Rouge wanted to create a new society and wipe out everything they thought was bad. That's why they closed all the schools in the country, so that nobody could learn anything that the Khmer Rouge didn't agree with. Almost all educated adults were killed.

One school with a terrible history is the Chao Ponhea Yat High School in the capital city of Phnom Penh, which was made into a prison for torture. The classrooms became prison cells. People accused of treason were taken there.

Often whole families were imprisoned, even the children. The prisoners usually didn't know why they were there, but were tortured until they confessed to the crime of which they were accused. Once they had confessed they were sentenced to death. Almost all of the 17,000 children and adults who were held captive in the school were killed.

Now the school is a museum in memory of all the terrible things that happened there. One of the rooms is now a classroom again. Visitors from Cambodia and all over the world come here to learn, so that these horrific things cannot be allowed to happen again.



Education

IS important!

Wants to build a big yellow school

5x8

"I think maths is important, especially multiplication. When I am an engineer I'm going to build a big yellow school for children."

Sokhgim, 13

Wants to talk to people from all over the world

"English is important, so that I can talk to people from all over the world. I want to be able to read English books and write messages to friends on the computer."

Somaly, 14



Children at PIO's school.

Phymean together with children in the school's dining room, where everyone gets lunch.



been so afraid. All Phymean has left is the four walls of her house, and a bike. Every morning before dawn she gathers water from the garden and fills a tank. When it's full, she sells the water as drinking water.

Phymean gets a job as a secretary. She doesn't earn much, but she is allowed to bring her two-year-old niece to work, where she sits under the desk all day.

After work Phymean cycles to an evening school and when school is finished she cycles home in darkness. When they get home, Phymean cooks rice and puts her niece to bed. Then she begins her third job – copying story books by hand, word for word. There are no photocopiers, and there is a publisher that really likes Phymean's neat handwriting. She works until late at night.

Phymean struggles for many years. She manages to get an education and she finds her sister again, so her niece gets her mother back.

Phymean gets a job working for the UN, and helps with the first free elections in Cambodia. She moves to the capital city Phnom Penh, works in an office, buys a car and has money in the bank. Suddenly, life is straightforward.

The children love being able to go to Phymean's school every morning.





Wants to paint PIO's history

"I like painting landscapes and animals, especially rabbits. When I grow up I want to be an artist. I am going to paint the history of PIO."

Pich, 13



Khmer and computers important

"Khmer is important for me, because I want to work in industry. So I need to be able to read and work on a computer."

Kakada, 11



Wants to fly to another planet

"Computers are the most important thing to learn about. I want to be a pilot and the cockpit is like one huge computer. Or I'd like to be an astronaut and fly to another planet."

Kim, 12

Fighting for chicken legs

One day Phymean is eating a grilled chicken for lunch on the banks of the Mekong River. She throws her chicken legs on a trash pile, and suddenly five children appear. They fight and claw at one another to get to the remains of the chicken. Phymean is appalled.

"Stop, stop!" she shouts. "Stop it! I'll buy a new chicken for you, come and sit down."

As they eat, the children tell her that they have come from a rural area, because their parents were looking for work. But the only jobs are as waste pickers on the garbage dump, where they live too. They explain how they fight for survival every single day.

"How can I help you?" asks Phymean.

"I just want to go to school," says one of the boys.

When Phymean leaves the

children, she can't get peace of mind. She thinks about the children on the garbage dump. They are fighting, with no help, just like she did.

The next day Phymean goes to Phnom Penh's largest gar-

bage dump, which is as high as a mountain. She meets the children and parents, sees the canvas roofs they live under, sees the garbage trucks that plough on regardless of children in their way. She sees



Vocational training

As the children get older, some want to carry on studying and others would rather learn a trade. PIO offers students the chance to learn to be hairdressers and makeup artists. Sita, 14 and Srechpich, 15, want to open their own salon in the future, and Srechpich wants to be a fashion designer.



Phymean's green school building is beside the former garbage dump, where the children now play and goats graze.



It's 2002 and Phymeans visits girls on the garbage dump for the first time.

➔ open wounds that never heal. The stench is everywhere. It's like coming into hell itself, thinks Phymeans.

She quits her job, takes out all her money from the bank, and sets up her work at the garbage dump. Most of the children are desperate to go to school, but the parents are unsure. The children have to help provide for their families, otherwise the families will starve.

On the first day, 25 children come to Phymeans's school. Then more and more. Phymeans connects the first tap bringing clean water to the garbage dump. They need food and teachers too.

Phymeans is at the garbage dump every day. She is their teacher, leader, janitor, counsellor – she is everything to the children. Slowly, the school becomes established. More children and more teachers come, and after a



couple of years, Phymeans opens another school.

Never give up!

Thirteen years have passed since Phymeans started her organisation. There are now three schools and a children's home for orphaned or aban-

doned children. The organisation also helps families and communities around the garbage dump.

"Never give up! That's how I think, and that's what I say to the children at school. The children here have a tough life. There are gangs, drugs,

and much danger. But we help the children to visualise their dreams and fight to achieve them. If I managed it, then so can they. And we are capable of achieving everything we set out to do!" 🌍



Hor talks about dreams with Phymeans.

What's your dream?

"I have worked at the garbage dump since I was nine years old," says Hor, 16, who works at the new garbage dump. I have seen a lot of children buried alive under trash. It happened to two of my friends when we worked together. I managed to get out of the way in the nick of time, but they both ended up buried under the trash. When we found them, only one of them was still alive."

"What would you like to do instead of working here?" asks Phymeans.

"I have to work here," replies Hor. "I can't write, and I haven't learnt any other trade, so I can't dream. I don't have a dream."

"What?! You have to have a dream!" exclaims Phymeans.

They talk about dreams for the future and finally Hor laughs:

"Okay, okay! I want to learn to fix motorbikes. I can earn a good living doing that. I actually do want to learn something!"

Fighting for their dreams

Phymeans had lots of dreams when she was young. She dreamt of speaking English, flying in an aeroplane, and helping children who had hard lives. Now she can speak English and she has flown in aeroplanes and helicopters. And she has helped thousands of children towards a better life.

Now her dream is to build another school and get some buses so that she can transport children from other areas to her schools. After that, her next dream is to study for a doctorate at university.

"But university is going to have to wait until I retire!" she says.

School dreams come true



Little sisters

Kean and Phally at their uncle's wedding in their home village.



Big sisters

Little sister Phally and Kean both worked on the garbage dump and dreamed of being able to go to school.

Kean fills her sack, piece of plastic by piece of plastic. She stands at the bottom of one of the deep holes on the garbage dump. Suddenly she hears a roaring motor and the rustling noise that can only mean one thing: falling trash! Kean pulls herself up and narrowly manages to escape the avalanche of trash started by the tractor, that fills the hole where she was standing.

A few years earlier, when Kean is eight, she and her younger sister Phally leave their home village in southern Cambodia. They say goodbye to their parents and squeeze into a minibus with their grandmother. After three hours they have reached their destination: the Stung Mean Chey garbage dump in the capital city of Phnom Penh, where they will work from morning



Girls standing on their own two feet!

"In Cambodia it's still common for girls not to be able to go to school, because families think it's unnecessary. After all, girls are expected to marry and have a husband who will take responsibility for them. The husband is automatically in charge. But I think that's wrong! Through education more people can come to understand that women can also be leaders of their area or their family. If a woman relies on a man, she cannot stand on her own if he disappears. Therefore I want to teach girls to stand on their own two feet. And to go after their dreams!" says Phymean.

Focus on girls

Phymean's organisation PIO helps both boys and girls. But Phymean Noun knows that girls are extra vulnerable, to risks from both outside and within the family. They are often forced to leave school early and start working with their parents. They often need to help more at home and so have less time for homework and resting. Consequently, it is primarily girls who receive extra support from the school, for example, rice for their family every month. The parents must sign a contract, in which they promise to support their daughter in her studies and that she will not need to work in the evenings or at night.

→ till night, every day of the week.

A garbage dump is a dangerous workplace. Kean and Phally soon learn what happens to the children who don't manage to escape the avalanches of falling trash. The first time Kean sees it,



Kean, 14

Best moment: When my grandmother said we could start school.

Worst moment: When she said we had to stop school.

Feels proud: When I can teach somebody something.

Likes: Embroidery and dancing.
Afraid of: The part of the dump where the most people have died - there could be ghosts there.

she is a few metres from a boy who is standing further down the side of the garbage dump. The tractor driver on top of the heap doesn't see them, and shovels garbage right over the boy.

Kean and everyone else who can see the boy disappearing under the trash shout to one another. Adults and children are soon working together to dig him out.

When the boy emerges, Kean sees how he looks terrified. But the next day he's back on the garbage dump working away as if nothing

ever happened. Kean knows that if he wants to be able to eat, he doesn't have a choice.

Another time, a boy disappears under the trash and only the children notice. They shout for help, and although an adult comes to help eventually, it takes too long to dig the boy out. Later, Kean hears that by the time they found the boy he was dead.

The child in the sack

Kean tries to stay away from the tractors and goes to the burning garbage heap to find

Kean and Phally eat lunch at school. When they worked at the dump they were often hungry, and Phally in particular hates being hungry.



Favourite

Lily the kangaroo is named after a volunteer who works at PIO.

Phally's first friend

Phally's first new friend when they arrived at the children's home was Leak. "She took my hand and asked my name when we were about to play a game called Cat chase mouse. Everybody stands in a circle and there are two teams. Two people are chosen to do Scissors, paper, stone. The loser becomes the mouse and the winner is the cat. The mouse runs out of the circle and the cat chases. The people on the mouse's team try to stop the cat from getting out of the circle."



Phally, 13

Curious about: Snow.

Misses: My grandmother, who is dead now.

Happy about: Being able to go to school.

Likes: Talking to new people.

Favourite colour: Yellow.



iron and other valuable things. But there are other dangers there. Bottles can explode in the fire, sending shards of glass flying. Just walking across the garbage heap is taking your life in your hands. Kean often falls waist-deep into puddles that gather among the trash. It's impossible to spot them, because the surface is covered in floating plastic bags and other trash, so they blend in. Anyone who falls in a hole like that and goes under will never be found again.

Kean and her sister spend every day looking for trash they can sell. Sometimes they are so hungry that they eat food that others have thrown out. The clothes they wear come from the dump too. Sometimes they find undamaged clothes, that have been thrown out just because they have small stains on them. It makes the sisters angry to think that there are rich people who throw away good clothes and food that is still edible. One day Kean spots something that looks like a

good find. Something that she'll never forget. She has just begun her days' work when she sees a large black sack. Her first thought is that maybe it's something she could sell. When she gets closer and grabs the sack she gets a feeling it could be full of meat. She takes her hook and opens the sack. The sight that meets her eyes will stay with her for a long time. There is dead child in the sack. Kean runs away as fast as she can.

The woman with the school
One day, Kean and Phally see a woman walking around the garbage dump, giving out protective masks and talking to the people who work there.

Kean and Phally each take a mask and listen carefully as the woman talks to them about a school. The children are invited to go with the woman to see the school. Phally has never seen such a big school before. There are new people everywhere, and Phally feels scared. But when Phymean, the woman who



Cosy bed

Phally has made colourful origami flowers and put them up on the ceiling above the bed, which she shares with her friend. The children can make flowers from almost anything. Phally's things are on a shelf behind the bed - craft materials, books, photos and toys. When she and Kean lived on the garbage dump they had nothing. Phally saves money in a red piggy bank. She uses it to buy extra food from time to time.





Hand dance

Traditional Cambodian dances are full of hand movements, that the sisters practice.



brought them there, explains that the school is free for all children, Phally dares to hope that the sisters might be able to go to school.

The sisters tell their grandmother about the school visit.

"Please can we go to school?"

"No," replies their grandmother. "Unless you keep gathering trash we'll all starve."

Phally cries and keeps on pleading with her grandmother:

"I don't want to spend my whole life working on a garbage dump!"

Finally, their grandmother gives in. The girls are allowed to start school.

Every day after school, Kean and Phally go back to gather trash. When they get home to their little shack late



Dancing is the sisters' main hobby. They do traditional dancing and hip hop. PIO has a dance troupe that has performed at major festivals and on TV. This is a way to earn money that goes straight to the school and children's home.

at night, they do the housework while their grandmother sorts out the trash. Then they sit down to study. They are afraid of not being able to keep up with the lessons, so they try to learn as much as they can at home.

The sisters' days are long, and they are exhausted every day. But it's worth it. Going to school is the best thing that's ever happened to them.

The hunger strike

One day, when Kean gets home from school, her grandmother is coughing worse than usual. She has TB and

she is very weak. What's more, the garbage dump is closing down, and everyone who made their living there is going to have to walk the streets of Phnom Penh. Their grandmother won't manage that. They have to go home to their village.

Kean and Phally cry the whole way in the minibus. All they want is to stay at school, but their grandmother doesn't want to leave them there alone.

Back in their home village, they plant rice every waking hour. Kean often cries. She thinks about school, and how

many lessons she is missing as the days pass.

Kean and Phally's family don't listen to the girls as they argue and plead. So they make a plan: They won't eat a single thing until they are allowed to go back to Phnom Penh - and school. The sisters' hunger strike goes on for several days and finally, they get their way. They hold one another's hand and jump for joy. They are so happy. And so hungry!

Wonderful shampoo

They travel back on the long road to the capital city. Their grandmother travels with



The girls at the children's home have a large bag of make-up to share. They learn to do one another's make-up before dance performances. Somaly has taught the others how to do it.

Kean and Phally's wardrobe

The sisters are the same size, and they share a small wardrobe in a narrow corridor of the children's home. When they worked on the garbage dump all they had was the clothes they stood up in. Now they have several changes of clothing and they can swap too!

Dance clothes

Kean and Phally love dancing, both hip hop and traditional dancing. One of the most popular dances is called Robam Nesat and tells a whole story about fishing and life by the river.





Phally and Kean like hopscotch. There is a hopscotch game painted on the asphalt outside the children's home.

Phally and her friend Pich read books from the library during the last hour of the school day. Phally loves going to school. When her grandmother took her and Kean back to their home village, the sisters started a hunger strike to be able to come back to the capital city and return to school.



them to check that they are able to move into the PIO children's home.

For the first time, the girls are able to wash their hair with shampoo.

"It's so wonderful. I have worked on the garbage dump so long, and I'm used to always thinking I smell bad and worrying that people will think I'm disgusting. Now I am finally able to feel completely clean," says Phally.

Kean and Phally's parents still live in their home village. At Cambodian New Year, in April, the sisters go home for a visit. They help their parents to cook and clean the house for the celebrations. In

the middle of the festivities, a group of children approach Kean.

"Can you teach us to speak English? And show us how to write the alphabet?" they ask.

Kean feels so proud. She is delighted to be able to teach something, and pleased that the children think learning is fun. Her parents watch as she shows the children how to write the letters. They glow with pride.

"I really am a happy girl now that I have the chance to go to school. If I hadn't come to PIO I don't know what my future would have held," says Kean, concluding her story. 🌐

PIO uniform

At school, everyone wears the uniform they get from PIO. Phally wears this every morning.



Garbage dump clothes

Sreynoch's garbage dump clothes. The children who work at the garbage dump always try to have clothes that are as protective as possible. Ideally long-sleeved tops and boots, but that's not always possible. Kean often got hurt when she worked at the garbage dump, wearing short-sleeved tops and no shoes.



Casual clothes

Usually trousers and t-shirts.



Special occasions

Kean's favourite top and jeans.

School uniform

In the afternoon, Kean goes to the local state school, so she changes into that uniform so that she has the right crest on her school top.

Kean and Phally each have a basket of hygiene products. The toothbrushes are gifts from a dentist who comes once a year to check all the children's teeth. The children at the PIO home shower several times a day. Because they have lived without clean water for so long, they love washing!



Last day at the



Srey Nich, 14

Dream: To become a singer.

Likes: Styling my friends' hair.

Feels safe: With my grandmother.

Secret talent: Can change clothes fast as lightning.

Afraid of: The machines on the dump.

Angry that: My mother doesn't take care of me.

The temperature is 40 degrees and there is no shade at the dump. Sharp fragments of glass stick up between the plastic bags, and scraps of food attract swarms of flies. Srey nich uses her hook to search through the trash. She doesn't know yet that today is her last day at the dump...

Srey nich lives with her grandmother in a simple shack on stilts beside the dump.

"I am so angry with my mother for abandoning me. I see her every day, but she lives with her new husband and she doesn't take care of me."

Srey nich is wearing boots and a long-sleeved top to pro-

tect her from the shards of glass, syringes, nails and sharp metals, but she still gets hurt sometimes. She wears a hat to protect her head from the burning sun.

The dump is shaped in a steep slope. As the trash gets pushed down by the tractors, it gathers speed and pulls everything else with it like an avalanche. Anyone standing at the foot of the mountain of garbage when this happens

only has a few seconds to escape being buried alive under the trash.

Srey nich started gathering trash when she was ten, and now she is fourteen. She has seen people get injured, and she has seen people die.

"Once I saw a boy get buried under a mountain of trash. By the time they managed to reach him he was dead."

When the garbage trucks come to dump their waste, the risk-takers (often boys) run right up to them. They hurry to grab the most valuable waste, and sometimes violent fights break out. The youngest children stay at a safe distance. They can't defend themselves against the older ones, and they can't get



Wants to teach the poor

"It is really hard to walk barefoot on the dump. I sometimes cut myself on the hook I use to gather garbage. I am afraid all the time. I have seen tractors cover children with trash several times. I want to go to school instead. Learn to read and write in both English and Khmer, and become a teacher. I have seen so many poor people who need an education."

Doeun Viyuth, 13



dump



away when the tractors come to move the trash. Many children and adults are seriously injured or die in accidents on the dump.

Dreams come true

When her family lived in their home village, Sreynich was allowed to go to school. She dreams of continuing learning to read, write, and speak English. Most of all she dreams of becoming a singer. On this particular day, one of her dreams is going to come true.

The sun is almost at its peak when Phymean Noun arrives at the garbage dump. Sreynich is curious about this woman who talks to the children at the garbage dump about school. Sreynich's grandmother is curious too.

She has heard of PIO and seen children's lives get better through starting school there. She knows that children have much better prospects in life if they go to school. Sreynich wants to go there too.

"I want to get an education, and I really love learning things," she says.

Phymean has a bed available at the children's home, and agrees to accept Sreynich. But the other family members feel worried. Sreynich's aunt, Kao Eak, is 20 years old, has Down's Syndrome, and can't speak. A year and a half ago, she was sexually assaulted and became pregnant. She has no breast milk for her nine-month-old baby and has to buy milk instead. She uses the money Sreynich earns



Once she is sitting at her desk, Sreynich starts to believe that she really is going to be able to go to school, and she begins to smile.

from the garbage dump to buy the baby's milk. What's going to happen?

Sreynich's grandfather doesn't want her to go either. He doesn't want to lose his domestic help, who does all the housework for him.

But her grandmother is determined. She tells Sreynich's grandfather and aunt that there will be no more discussion on the matter. Sreynich is going to school!

Safe and happy

To get to the PIO school, Sreynich is going to travel by car for the first time. She sings and smiles, but soon gets travel sick.

Her grandmother smiles. The chance to go to school is



"I think styling my friends' hair is fun, and I've come up with a way to cut old chopsticks to make them into hair clips."

something she has dreamt of for her beloved granddaughter. She will stay for the first night to help Sreynich settle in and feel safe.

They sit down on the floor, and Phymean introduces the other people who live at the children's home. Somaly, who takes care of the girls' dormitory, welcomes her. Sreynich is exhausted after the car journey, and her head is spinning with thoughts.

"I feel safe here, and I am so happy," she says.

The next day, as she sits at her desk with her books open, listening to the teacher's voice, Sreynich smiles. 🌍

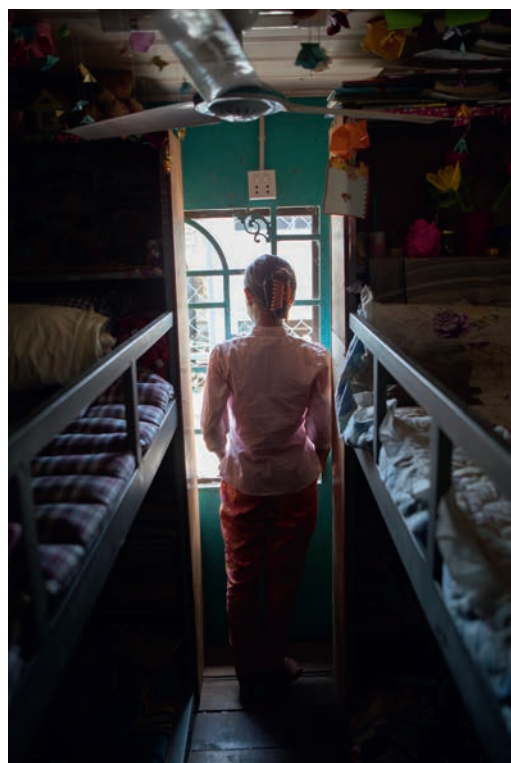
Sreynich has arrived at the PIO children's home. It's the first time she's going to live anywhere without her grandmother.



Just wants to go to school

"I don't want to be here. I never get to play because I always just wait for my mother. I would like to have a barbie doll, but I don't have anything. Except my jewellery. But I don't want to sell that. I found it on the dump. I just want to go to school. That's why I'm crying. I just want to go back to my village and go to school."

Cheat Nary, 5



Long day of sc

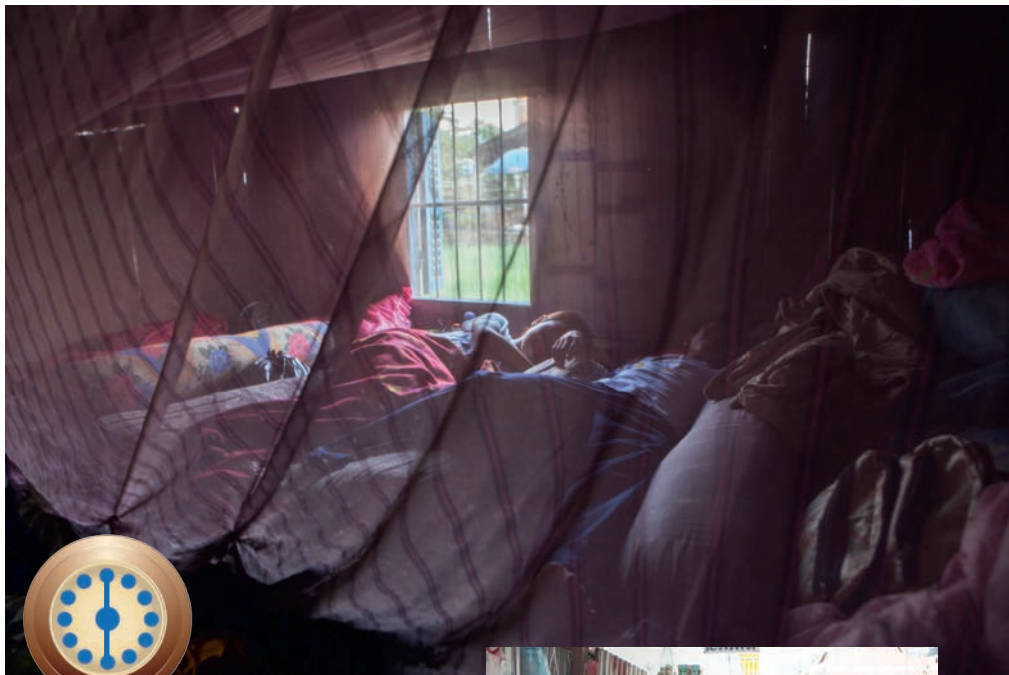
Langeng, 15, lives with his sister Pich, 13, his mother and seventeen relatives in a shack beside the old garbage dump. His mother is seriously ill, but she has to work hard to make sure the family can afford food. In the evenings, Langeng goes with her.

Things were worse when Langeng was little. He didn't go to school then, he just worked as a waste picker all day long.

"I was always hungry. I picked up mouldy fruit that people had thrown away and drank the last drops out of any bottles I could find."

Langeng and his sister saw other children with school uniforms and school-bags. They begged and pleaded, and finally they were allowed to start attending PIO.

"Football, school and my friends make me happy. But whenever I think about my mother being ill, it makes me really sad. So sad that I get angry."



06:00 Wake up

Langeng and Pich sleep side by side in the family bed. The mosquito net protects them from the mosquitoes that thrive in the humid heat.

06:30 Clean and tidy

Every Wednesday Langeng sweeps the classroom floor before class, to make sure it's clean when his classmates come in from assembly.



09:30 TV break

At break time, Langeng and his friends go to the kiosk beside school and watch the news.



11:00 Fried food, yum!

All the children eat lunch on the roof of the school. Without this meal, many of the children would go hungry. Langeng's favourite lunches involve fried vegetables and lots of laughter around the table!



hool and garbage



14:15 So tired, so tired...

Langeng has a nap during almost every lunch break, but sometimes he is so tired that he drops off during the English lesson in the afternoon. He only got five hours' sleep last night, since he was working until the early hours.



15:00 Start up the computers

The last lesson of the day is held at the computers, or in the library.



17:00 Ten minutes of volleyball

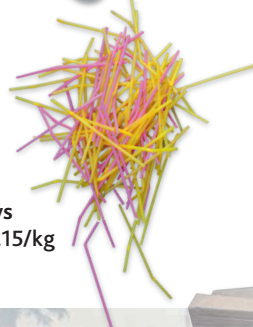
After school, Langeng eats some rice and takes the chance to play volleyball for a few minutes, before starting work.



Plastic and rubber shoes
US\$0.10/kg



Plastic bottles
US\$0.20/kg



Straws
US\$0.15/kg



17:15 The evening shift starts

Langeng changes into his waste picker clothes. Then he heads for the city centre, through the dangerous traffic, to gather trash.



19:00 Valuable garbage

At first, Langeng and his mother each choose their own spot to work, but when darkness falls it's safer to stick together. Soon they'll switch on their head torches, so that they can see where they are searching. They gather cardboard, different kinds of plastic, cans and other metal objects, which they then sell to a dealer. Every dealer specialises in one particular kind of trash, which they then gather for recycling.



Cardboard
US\$0.10/kg



Kong paints

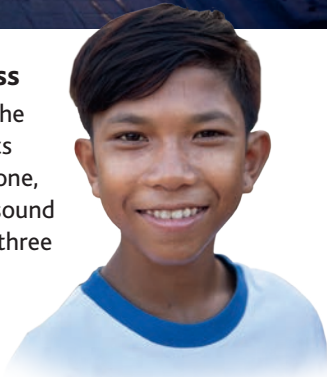


21:00 Walking in darkness

There is still heavy traffic on the roads in the evening. Accidents often happen. This evening alone, Langeng has heard the harsh sound of glass and metal shattering three times.

00:30 Shower before bed

When they finally get home, they park the cart full of garbage beside their shack. Despite his tiredness, Langeng has a shower. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to sleep as he would be itching all over. After eating some leftover rice from the others dinner, he goes to bed.



Langeng, 15

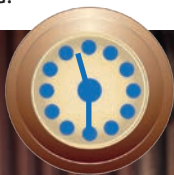
Likes: Football and volleyball – I play as often as I can.

Best thing: Being the first to reach the trash on a street full of restaurants.

Worst thing: When adults gamble money away.

Gets angry: When someone says unkind things about my mother.

Wants to be: A doctor.



Srey Kong has painted her family's life at the garbage dump in Stung Meanchey on the wall of the school. The family's surname, Sok, means happy, but the ten siblings have not always had happiness on their side.

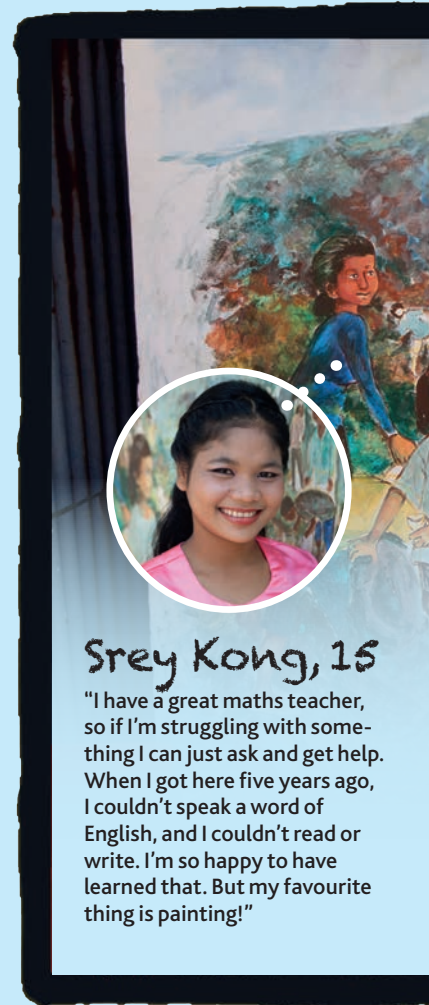
The Sok family travelled to the capital city, Phnom Penh, because they couldn't get enough food to get by in their home village. They hoped for a better life in the capital, but instead they ended up on the garbage dump. Today, four of the children go to the PIO school. There, they fight to achieve their dreams. But the family has shrunk, and there is much sorrow.

The children's mother fell ill with hepatitis. It became gradually harder for her to eat, and one day when the children got home from school their mother was gone. She had returned to their home village without saying goodbye, and not long after that she died.

"Our father couldn't take care of us after our mother passed away, so he took us four youngest children to the children's home and left us there," says Srey Kong.

Sorrow and joy

Working at the garbage dump was tough, dangerous and badly paid, so when the eldest sister, Phally, got a job at a textile factory, they were delighted. But one morning, as she left the family's little house beside the garbage dump to go to work, she was knocked over by a garbage truck and was killed. Another sister met a man. They travelled together to Thailand.



Srey Kong, 15

"I have a great maths teacher, so if I'm struggling with something I can just ask and get help. When I got here five years ago, I couldn't speak a word of English, and I couldn't read or write. I'm so happy to have learned that. But my favourite thing is painting!"

But it soon turned out that the man had tricked her, and didn't want to be with her at all. Instead, he sold her to a brothel.

So many sad things have happened to the family, and sometimes it's painful to think about it. It helps to draw those thoughts and memories. Sisters Srey Kong and Somaly love drawing and painting. At PIO, all talents are nurtured, and the children get to learn the skills that interest them. Every Sunday, an artist comes to help the sisters develop their skills with different materials and techniques. They have painted murals, huge paintings on the walls of the school. 🌐

her story



Somaly, 16

"I went to school until Year 5, so I got to learn the basics of reading, writing and English. Since then I have worked here at the children's home, supporting the younger girls and learning vocational skills. My favourite thing is painting. But I have learned lots of different things, like cutting hair and putting on make-up."



Bros Pov, 10

His name means 'youngest brother'
 "If I was in charge of Cambodia, I would help the poor, because there are so many and life is so hard for them. I love playing and ball sports, and I have lots of friends. But I don't like fights. I've seen far too many. And I don't want to play in places where we could get hurt."



Srey Kong has painted a mural on the oldest school building. In the centre is Phymean and all around on the garbage dump Srey Kong has painted the children and their friends.



Phymean

"Our life on the garbage dump"



Lyta, 14

"I remember when we came to the garbage dump. It was hard to live there, and I cut myself on things all the time. Some days I didn't earn enough for food. I often think about our sister who got sold in Thailand. I feel so sorry for her, and I don't think there's any chance that she'll come back to us."

Pin

"Pin is my friend from when we worked on the dump. He is two years younger than me. Now he works at the new garbage dump," explains Srey Kong.

Talents should be encouraged

Every Sunday, an artist comes to teach Srey Kong, Somaly, and the other children who have a special interest in painting.



Pha and Sinet go to the PIO school. Their mother Sina buys plastic which she washes in a bathtub outside their home. For eight hours a day, she washes 15kg of plastic bags and hangs them up to dry. She buys the plastic bags from a couple who gather them from the streets.

Plastic becomes plastic

I don't know what happened to my family. Suddenly our father wanted to leave us," explains Pha. "He had met another woman. I had to cycle a long way on an old bicycle to go to his wedding. I cried the whole way there."

Before they split up, the children had seen their father beat their mother many times.

"I cried and tried to pull my mother out of his grasp. But I was a child and there was nothing I could do to stop it," says Sinet.

Pha remembers life on the garbage dump.

"People looked down at me because I worked there, and other people at the dump would chase me and beat me," he says.

When the dump closed, the family started to walk the streets with a cart, from four in the afternoon until midnight. There was a lot of trash to gather around the market. But people often shouted at them.

Pha cycles home with the 25kg of rice that the family get from PIO every month. That means he doesn't need to help his mother with the plastic and can concentrate on his education.



Sinet helps his mum to hang up the plastic to dry.

Sinet loves life at the PIO school.



"Men asked for my number and asked me to come and sleep with them. I got scared and ran away," says Sinet.

Every month, the family get 25kg of rice from PIO. It makes a big difference. But the most important thing they get from PIO is education.

"I love my life here. We get rice, a bicycle, and school fees.

In the future I'd like to be a leader, or even better, create an organisation that helps women like my mother. Or I might like to be a journalist, because I love reading the papers and talking to people. Or maybe a photographer," says Sinet. 🌐

TEXT: JOHANNA HALLIN & EVELINA FREDRIKSSON PHOTOS: ALEXANDRA ELLIS



How recycling works



Ratana likes things neat and tidy

There is a date written on the green walls of Ratana's room – 10 December 2012. That was the day she said goodbye to her mother. Since then she has lived with her little brother, big sister and a cousin her age, in one small room.

We have to cook our own food. There are no adults to do it for us," says Ratana.

The floor is well swept and all their things are carefully stacked on a shelf. The children eat sitting on the floor and sleep on mattresses that they put away every morning before they go to school.

"It's important to me to

keep things neat and tidy."

Ratana came to Phnom Penh when she was nine years old. She worked as a waste picker with her mother and siblings. When the garbage dump closed, her parents decided to move to Thailand to work. They planned to save their children from having to gather trash by sending them money every month. But the

money their parents earn washing cars in Thailand is not enough. PIO gives Ratana a sack of rice every month. She and her siblings also get free education.

"I had to start in the pre-school class with the little ones, even though I was much older. But I studied hard and the teacher moved me up. I like English and Maths."

Miss my mother

The children miss their mother terribly. Ratana keeps a picture of her in her school book, and there are several pictures of her on the walls.

"Thinking of her makes me want to cry. She is not well – she has a tumour in her throat. If I phone her and she doesn't answer, I get worried in case something has happened."

"There is a bolt on the door, but every evening I feel scared. I'm afraid someone is going to steal my bike from outside. And I get frightened when it's dark and quiet. I sit up late studying, and fall asleep late every night." 🌐



Ratana misses her mother, who is in the photo. She is in Thailand working. Every evening, before she falls asleep, Ratana thinks of her.

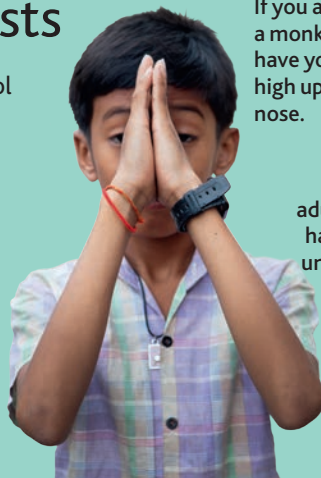


10 December 2012 is carved on the wall of the children's room. That's the date they were separated from their mother.



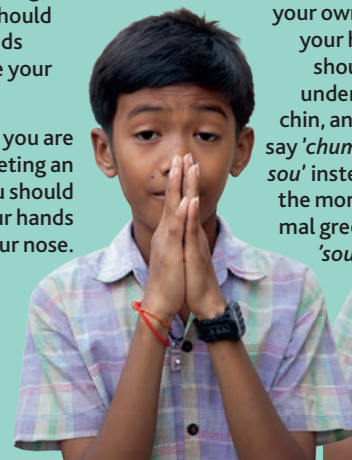
Wants to teach the tourists

Hin is 13 years old and has attended the PIO school for three years. He lives right behind the school with his mother, father and younger brothers. For several years, the family worked on the garbage dump, but these days only the parents work. "I want to become a tour guide and teach tourists about Cambodian culture and traditions. They are usually interested in these things. For example, I can show you how to perform a traditional greeting."



If you are greeting a monk, you should have your hands high up, above your nose.

If you are greeting an adult, you should have your hands under your nose.



If you are greeting someone of your own age, your hands should be under your chin, and you say 'chum reap sou' instead of the more formal greeting, 'soudsei'.

