



International Network for School Social Work

<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>

Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

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Editor: Marion Huxtable

Ubuntu for school children in Laos Xuyen Dangers

When I arrived in Laos it was one of the 10 poorest countries in the world. Laos, a Communist country landlocked between Thailand, Vietnam, China and Cambodia, at that time had 5 million people from 50 ethnic groups. Since the end of the war in Vietnam in 1975 many international NGO's provided support in every sector. I came to Laos in 1995 with my husband who worked for Church World Service. I learned Lao and had big dreams of many projects using my social work training and introducing social work training at the National University. The Lao philosophy of *Bó pen nhang* - no problem, relax, take it easy - helped me to use the real social work approach of start where they are and let them participate in solving their problems. Respect the local culture, use local resources, small, fun, out-of-the-box, and then see the potential unfold itself. Somehow the African concept of *Ubuntu* fits just right in Laos.

I had the opportunity to participate in training funded by UNICEF, Save the Children and Global Ministries through Church World Service. This set me on a path to work on children's rights by developing an after-school program with a village public school where we could work with Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances to meet the goals of The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: survival, participation, protection and development. The Donkoi Child Development Center and after-school program were created at Donkoi School and became a model that was spread to four other villages.

We developed activity clubs that aspired to make school, village, life better and more beautiful. The clubs depended on the skills of volunteers, so we had clubs for weaving, dancing, storytelling, drawing, gardening, all traditional activities in Laos. Slowly we developed a theater, a library, a garden, recycling. Teachers and volunteers were trained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The whole idea is to educate the child to be a well-rounded and confident person who contributes to the community with respect for the environment and care for each other – Ubuntu.

One of my big dreams was to introduce a social work course at the university. It was 10 years before I was able to bring the course "Introduction to Social Work" to the University. Later the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanity opened the Bachelor of Sociology and Social Development. Now there are young graduates every year ready to work, and there is much to do for

the school children. It still happens that some parents are too poor to send all their children to school, so some end up working or trafficked to work in factories, fishing or as child prostitutes. For those who do go to school the challenge is to keep them there. Schools lack supplies and equipment, homes lack a place to study. Children end up in conflict with the law, truant, drinking, using drugs. The Donkoi Child Development Center became a good field placement where I could supervise.

Dreams for everything

My dreams for many things became reality: recycling, planting trees, child-centered education, performances of classic Lao theater and dance, good field placements for social work students, international visitors and volunteers to our programs. Social work in the Ubuntu mode includes many things, even toilets. I promised to tell you about the Dream Toilet at Donkoi School.

Why the Dream Toilet became so popular

In 1995 many schools had no toilets. If there was a toilet it was wet, dirty and had no place to wash hands. Children had to go to the fields or walk home to use a toilet and maybe not come back to school. A new school was built at Donkoi – with a toilet. We turned that toilet into the dream toilet by fixing the water system, and building a sink where the children can wash their hands. The youth volunteers turned it into a beautiful place with murals.

When visitors came to visit the school, they were surprised to see a poor school with a beautiful toilet with flowers and banana plants around it. When the World Bank had an annual theme of Water and Sanitation, Donkoi was selected for visitors to see our Dream Toilet. It was also the only school with a child development center in the compound and a comprehensive after-school program. The Dream Toilet ideas spread out to other provinces in Laos. Small beginnings have spread far. In 2012, a recently trained social worker from the National University wrote a proposal to build a Dream Toilet at the village school at Donsangphai Village that she attended as a child.



With a grant from a Japanese NGO, recycled metal roof and volunteer brick-layers (plus volunteer youth trainees) it is beautiful. Everyone including teachers and little children helped paint murals inside and out. The local youths declare “I am a youth toilet builder”, displayed on home-made T shirts. In an informal survey, they counted 25 families from a total of 125 households that had no toilet. By 2014 they raised funds to build toilets for families of three of the poorest children, one of which was built by Australian kindergarten teachers supervised by the youth volunteers. Sticky rice *khao niew*, green papaya salad *tammakhung*, and charcoal roasted fish *pa ping* eaten under the banana trees with their village hosts, small donations by the Australian teachers for cement and sand – this is Ubuntu shared internationally.

With Ubuntu, small beginnings have had big results. In 2010, the University had the first 79 BSSD graduates. By the time I left Laos there were 400 social workers. They graduate as social workers, social development workers or community development workers - indigenous social work with a little international help.

