

Stories from Cambodia, 2007: Destiny's Child - by Arne Sahlén

I got a weird feeling one evening in November 2006, while riding a motorbike taxi (moto-dup) and chatting as usual with the driver. Very nice as usual, he was both shy and earnest. He *loved* English - not just the basics but parts of speech, tenses (Present Continuous, "I *am going...*") and so on. His rickety, pop-pop-wheeze bike showed true poverty for a moto dup. I learned later that his nights were spent sleeping in a street-side hammock.

A few years ago he had to quit school in Grade 12 to earn money for his poor rural family. So here he was, a moto-dup 180 km from home. He longed to study again. His silent wish filled the air - but with no hint of query or hope.

Why not bring his dream to life? Like Destiny nudging my shoulder - a feeling almost real - it began. We foreigners symbolize impossible dreams - for him, dreams of the education that western kids take for granted. *Well?* I thought it over as we rattled along at dusk.

Decide first, Arne. To ask leading questions, then back out would be too cruel. Then memories burst forth. For years the CSG resettled refugees - 204 of them - in often-random selection based on letters from the camps plus United Nations printouts of basic family data. A *great* experience overall, it was. Now all contacts and projects are carefully planned with our Khmer partners. It's a great arrangement, but still --

Missing the long-ago random elements, I teetered on the brink. *Good hunch about this fellow...* I sort-of let Destiny choose what to do, then -- *deep breath ... here goes...*

"If you had the chance, what would you like to do?"

Friends, meet Nouv Vuthim, 21 ("Noo Voo-TEEM") Now in BELTEI's Associate Degree stream since he did not finish school, he plans on a Bachelor Degree in future.

First thing a BELTEI Director told him on hearing our odd story: "Be sure you don't disappoint your sponsor." *Gak!* I made some crack about *me* not disappointing *him*, then said later: "This is not for me but for you. Do your best and know that I support you."

Vuthim stayed with me at first, then went to live (for \$8 a month) with two cousins nearby. He was planning on afternoon studies and morning moto-dup work. Surprise! BELTEI gives six months of *free* morning English if the year's fees are paid in advance. Great, but his earning time shrank. When he had to ask for money or supplies, his voice tightened from the strain. Deer-in-the-headlights wary and wide-eyed, he looked terrified that the dream might collapse. *What to do?*

First a long, gentle chat - "I don't want all this power. You need some control... It works both ways, I'm honoured to help you" and so on. We set a value for his English; that was his money to spend. But costs add up - food, school needs, this and that - and I'd been a volunteer for years. To work, he needed a decent bike. He sold his old rattle-trap, but couldn't afford much better. The 'new' one soon needed fixing. On it went --

Our wonderful CSG team in Canada solved things by adopting Vuthim, so funds can be raised for him through our regular channels. A relief! For a princely US\$40 per month (he asked for just \$25 at first) he can live, eat and study without wasting time, worry and energy on moto-dup uncertainties.

Vuthim is a valued member of our extended family (I'm Father, Dad, 'Dady' or Papa to eight young people in all.) We've been to his village together, riding for three hours one way in a nine-seat van with *27 other people*. I met his adorable family, also villagers of all ages who obviously think highly of this gentle, sincere young man.

Laughter and love burst forth now that Vuthim knows his dream is fade-free. Within a few months, he accelerated up a level in English. Can someone be *too* dedicated? Even for an Embassy-hosted reception, I couldn't persuade him to miss just one class.

Hats off to the random element! Though not planned as such (not planned at all in fact), Vuthim is a great *EXHIBIT A* - deeply dedicated like the vast majority of Cambodians. *Lonely Planet* travel books, past Canadian Ambassador D. Gordon Longmuir and others make that assessment. Destiny chose well with Vuthim; but many others deserve a chance too.

December 2009 update: **Nouv Vuthim** excels at BELTEI; he often tops his class. He now teaches Grade 2 full-time there and takes night classes. "Life is full of hope," he says. "I am so glad. Thank you so much to my sponsors! I wish you a lot of happy in your family. I wish the best."

