



# LOTUS EDUCATIONAL FUND ANNUAL NEWSLETTER



**THE GRADE 12  
GRADUATING CLASS  
OF 2020**

## THE YEAR IN REVIEW

This has been a special year for Lotus as our first cohort of girls graduated from their final year of school. With your support over the past twelve years, Lotus has both facilitated and augmented the education of our current Grade 12 and Grade 7 students. The community of St Therese's Primary School, New Lambton, Australia have been instrumental in securing the funding for these girls to start school. Together with all our sponsors it is a great achievement that fifty percent of the Grade 12 girls completed twelve years of education. This statistic is a sensational success given the poverty, isolation and cultural pressures of our girls and their families.

Our success throughout these years can also be attributed to the diligence of our local team, and the partnerships that we work to strengthen with local communities and organisations. Through the generous support of the late Dr John Schiller, we are pleased to establish a scholarship fund for girls who wish to study at the post-secondary level. Ms Julia Alden, a Lotus Committee member is working closely with our local team and local partnerships to prepare the girls with career planning.

It has been another engaging year as our girls move through Secondary School and new support programs are introduced in collaboration with our in-country partners. Lotus provides opportunities for students and teachers to participate in workshops. Currently Lotus is providing support for the year 12 girls to access vocational training, vocational training, Life Skills and Intensive English workshop opportunities.



Members of the Lotus Advisory Committee are currently revising our Strategic Plan to accommodate different educational pathways needed to support the girls. Some girls have been forced to leave school to work as a result of poverty or married as a result of cultural beliefs, while other girls are able to complete secondary school.

During the next twelve months we look forward to broadening our mentoring partnerships through our Life Skills and Teacher Professional Development workshops.

While primary schooling is a basic need for all children, secondary education for adolescents can be transformative. Many benefits are immediate. The Lotus girls know that they can continue their secondary education with the support of Lotus. In many cases these girls are the only children in the family who will complete secondary school. Being in school along with boys during adolescence fosters greater gender equality in the daily lives of adolescents.

Education for adolescent girls can help them access to life opportunities such as those currently being experienced by the Grade 12 girls.



*Lotus supports Laotian girls in rural areas to access education while promoting development of the whole girl.*



# Our Team In Laos

*It is extremely important to note that whilst Lotus has a dedicated team of people outside of Laos, none of the work would be possible or effective without the amazing Lao team.*

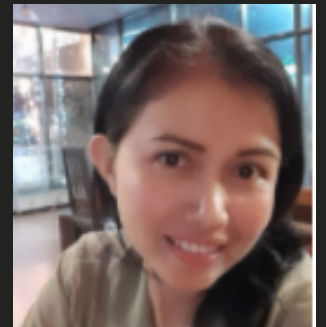
## Honorary Lotus Director- Dr Phoudalay Lathvilavong



With a career spanning many years developing new rice varieties, Dr Phoudalay is highly respected as a global agricultural researcher and advisor. She established Thasano Station (a Rice and Seed Multiplication Research Centre) where she conducts training sessions for farmers. In 2008, she was a founding member and Advisor for the Lotus Educational Fund Ltd. From selecting the first cohort of Lotus girls to opening Thasano station for Lotus workshops, Dr Phoudalay is a valuable role model for all Lao women and girls.

## Lotus Project Advisor- Lanta Ketoukham

Lanta has worked with Lotus in different capacities for the past four years. In her roles, Lanta visited schools to represent Lotus at a community level building relationships with parents, teachers and students.. This was her second year collaborating with Lotus on our teacher training program at Thasano station. Lanta will move to the role of Lotus Project Advisor and work closely with our Project Manager Alex as the Grade 12 girls prepare to transition to their post-secondary life choices.



## Lotus Project Manager-Alex Phonsavanh



Alex took a big leap of faith in 2014 and left her comfort zone in the US for the unknown in Savannakhet, Laos. She originally moved to Savannakhet to teach English, but has since built a family there! She has a BA in Liberal Arts from St. John's College, an MA in TESOL and Intercultural Studies from Wheaton College, and has worked in a variety of urban and rural schools in Laos. Passionate about empowering young girls through education, Alex is delighted to serve as the Lotus Program Coordinator in Savannakhet. Alex is fluent in Lao and can read and write in Lao.

## Lotus Community Officer- Touktar Xaiyasak

Touktar has been employed as a volunteer Science teacher for the past 6 years. She has been involved with the Lotus Educational Fund Ltd since 2012. In her role as Lotus Community Officer, Touktar liaisons with the school community and families on issues that impact the girls education.

Her calm manner and skill in relationship building at the village and school level has strengthened our partnerships across local and national levels.



# Life Skills Workshop 2020

**Workshop Goal:** *To be empowered to make good choices and build inner strength. To build skills and confidence for looking to the future and making school, job and career choices.*

The Life Skills Workshop for 2020 was a special event this year as it was the last workshop that would be carried out for the Grade 12 girls. These 22 girls would be taking their secondary exams in July and graduating from LOTUS as well as from secondary school in their village.

This group of girls has been with LOTUS for 10 years and it was an emotional week for all of us. The Life Skills week at Thasano 2020 also hosted thirty-two Grade 7 girls. This is the second group of girls that will go through the life skills workshops with LOTUS until they finish their secondary school in five years' time.

Life Skills encompasses training on life skills, basic health and reproduction knowledge and skill development in safe migration and anti-trafficking.

Life skills 2020 for the Grade 12 girls had a definite focus on preparing the girls for after-graduation. Many sessions were devoted to developing career options.

We continued to build on this concept by having local visitors who talked about their areas of study in the university or the professions they were engaged in. A representative talked to the girls about technical vocations that were available to them such as hospitality and food service work. The girls got the opportunity to interact with university students who were studying in fields such as nursing and economic development.

By the end of the school year, all graduates had nominated their top 3 career options. This is an enormous success in itself.

Over the years in offering the workshops, we have been building key areas that would help the girls make choices about their lives. These skills included self-confidence, identity, problem-solving, making good choices and communication and presentation skills. This workshop had the girls writing a 'biography' of themselves which they used to do mock interviews with each other to help prepare them for interviews at future schools.

The fruits of these years of the workshops have culminated in many of the Grade 12 girls ready to take exams for careers in nursing, agriculture and development studies. Many others will study short term to gain knowledge and skills in tailoring, cooking and hospitality.

Our new Project Coordinator and Community Liaison have continued to work with the girls in the village on refining and choosing the right career option. They have also worked on their scholarship applications.



*Dr Denise Nesbitt, Kimpop and Julia Alden*

# Life Skills

The Grade 7 girls are just starting out in their journey! Most of the workshop week has focused on setting workshop agreements; how to listen to others, how to collaborate and work as a team. We did some activities that highlighted the girls' strengths or character and from this we began the important work of creating a LOTUS girl 'profile'. Qualities such as hard working, respectful, and kind are a few of the characteristics identified as a Lotus girl.

We will continue to work on these in the future workshops. Developing this idea early on as 'a Lotus girl' has great potential. Another focus of the workshop for the younger girls was building relationships. We know that from our work with the grade 12's, one key aspect of building social/emotional strength is to build strong relationships among the girls and with the Lotus team. We begin to build the idea that it is worthwhile for the girls to stay in school and ask the girls themselves to generate the reasons why it may be. It is not easy for these girls to see this as there is still a real pull to leave school and go to work to help their families. We introduce some role playing around scenarios where girls have to make choices to stay in school or go to Thailand or Vientiane, for example to work.

During the week the girls also take half of their workshop sessions in health and reproductive training. Dr. Denise, our gyn from Australia was with us once again to support the girls in understanding their bodies and how to take care of them. While the Grade 12 girls have gone through extensive training on relationships, sexual behavior and staying sexually safe, the training for the younger girls is more focused on knowing and understanding their bodies. Girls get to watch videos of young developing female bodies.

They learn extensively about how the menstrual cycle works and make a bracelet that helps them understand the monthly cycle. This health and reproduction training are important as we have learned that the girls get no knowledge and training about how the female body works in school and often little at home

They are incredibly interested in this training and it takes years for this information to really solidify with the girls, so much of the teaching is repeated each year. Knowing about and being able to make wise choices about one's own body is essential to the overall development and wellbeing of the girls. Life Skills 2020 also hosted several university interns that organized daily games and sports activities. These young adults built strong relationships over the week with the Lotus girls and acted as essential role models and mentors. They brought energy and joy to the activities and the social environment of the week! The Lotus team is proud of the accomplishments of the Grade 12 girls and excited to see what the future holds for them. Education does make a difference!

Lotus is very appreciative of the generous support of **Maitland Toyota** that has enabled us to successfully run workshops since 2015.

Julia Alden  
Learning Facilitator





# Teacher Training Workshop



**Toukta Xaiyasak** graduated as a Science teacher at Savannakhet University seven years ago. Her study fees were supported by her sister who had migrated to Thailand. As there are a high quota of teachers in Laos, Toukta has been unable to secure full-time paid teacher employment. She is passionate about her role as a volunteer teacher at Laopaid Secondary School but is eagerly waiting to be employed full-time. Toukta has worked closely supporting the Lotus girls at the village level for the past seven years.

Toktar recently commenced the role of Community Project Officer. Her focus will be on building up capacity between Lotus and the Lotus families. She has been instrumental in drawing attention to the need to support teacher training. With the generous support of the **North Balywn Rotary Club, Victoria**, Lotus ran their first teacher training workshop in 2019. With their generous continued support, we have been able Teachers have willingly participated in our two workshops with the intent of improving their pedagogy to make learning more engaging and interactive for their students.

Lotus was able to invite ten volunteer teachers as they are located at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder of the education system. Several of whom spoke of their struggles to support themselves on a monthly salary (ranging from 100,000-150,000 LAK 12-18 USD per month), as they had to 'wait their time' until they became permanent.

During the five day program the teachers focused on strategies to support student-centred learning and being inventive with the limited resources available to them.

As the strategies were introduced the workshop quickly took a participatory approach as the teachers were sharing their skills they were very open to learn from their peers and to develop peer-support networks (especially within their subject groupings).

In rural areas, teachers do not have ready access to professional development opportunities and thus were extremely appreciative of the opportunity provided by North Balywn Rotary club, and Lotus in collaboration with the University of Savannakhet.

The teachers were excited to return to school with resource packs supplied by Rotary.



*Some of the eager participants*



*Teacher engaged in workshop activities*

# The John Schiller Scholarships



*The late Dr John Schiller*

Dr. John M. Schiller (Cathy Hart's Uncle) passed away 2 years ago Australia. He spent 30 years of his life working in Southeast Asia, primarily in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Dr Schiller worked as an agricultural scientist. During his time in Laos and Cambodia, Dr. Schiller was passionately committed to working with the people and building up local capacity. John was also involved in six Crawford Fund training programs in Laos and Cambodia. In 2012, the Crawford Fund recognised Dr. Schiller's tremendous contribution by awarding him with the Crawford Fund Medal. One of Dr Schiller's best memories was meeting the King of Thailand!

## **A note from John's niece, Cathy**

John's life's work was all about family, education and social justice. He left Lotus an amazing financial legacy in order to support the Lotus girls through any further educational opportunities they might have. Many of the year 12 girls are interested in taking up this opportunity. Last week, Dr Phoudalay and the Lao team went to the village to explain the Scholarships to the girls and their families. Apparently, Dr Phoudalay, had the crowd entranced! She moved from congratulating the girls and their families to joking with individual girls and then mildly scolding the group who listened carefully to everything she said. At the end of the talk many girls had to help their illiterate parents even to hold the pen so as to form a cross to indicate that they understood the terms of the scholarships. Dokkham (year 12) returned to the city to await university entrance exams. Dokkham is staying with our Lao Manager, Alex. Alex relates Dokkham's amazement at simple things like a stove (how fast it cooks in comparison to a fire) and she wanted to know what traffic lights were! How delighted John would be with it all! I wish he was still here but in a way he lives on through his gift!!!

This week Baisy and Vanvisa set off on a life changing journey from their village in Champhone District to the capital Vientiane. Lotus is supporting the girls as they participate in a three week pre-medical examination tutoring program.

The girls will then sit the exam and if successful they will commence their studies in September with the support of the Dr John Schiller scholarship program.

Currently, we have twenty girls applying for scholarships at the University, College, technical and vocational training levels.

We are very proud of all their achievements and we look forward to following the next phase of their journey.





# Student Sponsorship Update

The Lotus team would like to express their gratitude and appreciation to all the sponsors. Your continued support is greatly appreciated. During COVID the Laos schools were closed. Currently the Laos schools are on holidays and expected to open in September.

When the schools reopen then the Lotus team members in country, will visit the schools to report back exactly which Lotus girls have returned to school to continue their academic studies. As in the past we are hopeful for a very high retention rate as the girls move into Grade 8.

The sponsorship program will continue and each Lotus girl will receive a new sinh, blouses, sports uniform, shoes, academic text books and educational supplies. In addition, school fees for the year will be paid by Lotus.



## ***Registration begins***

Your sponsorship funds are making a difference to the lives of these young girls.

Thank you for your ongoing support and if you would like further details or to donate please visit:

<http://lotuseducationalfund.com>

Helen Keogh  
Sponsorship Coordinator

# Another School Year Begins



## ***Alex, Toktar, Phuang and Dokkham busy packing***

Lotus is so excited to welcome Alex, Phuang and Toktar to our team. Their smiles and energy are infectious, as they send through photos from their Saturday night packing session. They have already started the school registration process for 2020-21.

Poor baby Simon, accidentally ended up packed in a bag amid all the mayhem, if only momentarily.

It's been a real team effort from the start with Toktar sewing the sinhs, Alex and Phuang buying the textbooks and other supplies from the market. Dokkham has been boarding with Alex and has been lending a willing hand with packing, and babysitting Simon.

Lotus is very appreciative of the diligent efforts of our Lao team as it is a massive effort to coordinate all the activities associated with school registration.

This process is successful through the generous support of the student sponsorship program. Thirty five girls will enter Grade eight this year and we look forward to following the next phase of their journey.



# Student Profile- Dokkham

**Dokkham Konliphon** is twenty years old and has just graduated from Grade 12. Her journey to school is typical of many girls living in rural Laos.

Her family own a farm but don't have cows or buffaloes only keeping chickens and ducks so they can eat the meat. To support the household income her parents hired themselves out for odd jobs on other farms. However, this wasn't enough income to support their four children.

The eldest daughter migrated to Thailand to work in a factory, while her brother was fortunate to find a position as a soldier, with the help of her uncle.

When Dokkham was offered the chance to join Lotus by the village chief, her sister told her not to bother since there was no point. Even at the age of eight, Dokkham knew there were opportunities beyond the village.

In her final exams, through study, and completing early morning farm chores Dokkham was still able to secure third position in her class.



***Dokkham at the LifeSkills workshop 2020***



***Dokkham, Phedsvanh, Juer in 2008***

Dokkham has participated in all Life Skills workshops. She understands the value of education in making dreams a reality.

Presently, she is helping the Lotus team prepare the Grade 8 student packs for the next school year.

Next week she will apply for a Lotus Scholarship to study Agriculture at college. It is not surprising that with her calm, caring manner she wants to pursue a career connected to animal husbandry.

While she has watched her friends drop out of school to marry and even start families, she is determined to choose a different pathway. After completing her studies, Dokkham would like to add her voice to bring attention to the valuable role that women play in agriculture.

Importantly, Dokkham understands the importance of supporting girls to have access to education and she will continue the tradition. Should she have a daughter, she will definitely be going to school.

# Student Profile- Baisy

**Baisy Moudy** is a wonderful example of how education is building the capacity of girls in rural areas in Laos. At the age of seven, Baisy was the first member of her family to attend school. As her parents were struggling vegetable farmers most of their income went to supporting the household economy. Her younger sister had a medical condition and the extra income went towards necessary medication. When reflecting back on her schooling Baisy said that she never thought she would ever have the opportunity to go to school.

Living in Ban Nanokkhian in rural Laos, her parents didn't have this opportunity so they placed little value on education. That is until Dr Phoudalay visited the village in 2008 and invited Baisy to join the Lotus program.

Starting Grade One at Laopaid school Baisy said that she felt her dream had come true.

Baisy has shown the true qualities of what a Lotus girl is intended to represent; integrity, leadership, open-minded. She has attended every Lotus workshop including Life Skills, Vocational Training, and the Intensive English program.

At a school level, Baisy has demonstrated her leadership skills through teaching English at lunch-time to the Grade 7 girls.

Baisy has really proven to be a well-rounded student during her twelve years of schooling. She has worked diligently to top her yearly Grade exams. Her dream was always to continue her studies beyond the village school and she's on her way! This year Baisy graduated from Grade 12 and she hopes to continue her studies at the National University in Vientiane.

When she finishes her studies, Baisy would like to return to Ban Nanokkhian village to work as a doctor. "I want to come back to my village and help women and girls have healthier happier lives.



Through participating in our workshops, Baisy knows that many girls don't understand menstruation and this can impact their schooling. "More knowledge is needed and if I can help them understand their bodies then I will feel successful as a doctor."

Baisy is currently in Vientiane completing a three week pre-medical exam tutoring program. She is excited, studying hard and trying to reach her dream. Her Facebook page is filling up with encouraging posts of how much she is enjoying studying.

After Baisy sits the exam, she can then apply for a John Schiller Scholarship. This will cover the costs associated with completing her four-year study program.

The Lotus team look forward to following Baisy and the other Grade 12 graduates as they embark on the next exciting phase of their journeys.



# Lotus Advisory Committee

The Lotus Advisory Committee This year also saw Lotus Educational Fund develop a more formal structure for carrying the project forward. The organization is now guided by an Advisory Committee. The Lotus Advisory Committee is a group of volunteers who give advice and support to the Executive Team (the founding members, Dianne Gamage and Catherine Hart).

The Lotus Advisory Committee members bring their specific expertise and skills to support the governance of the organization. The Lotus Advisory Committee makes recommendations, gives information and materials to the organization to ensure the mission is being carried out in an efficient manner. Each member of the Lotus Advisory Committee may have delegated responsibilities.

We have many highly professional members on our Advisory Committee which include educators, a gynaecologist and several members who are development experts. The committee members support the educational programs, the on-going fundraising efforts, human resource needs and marketing the project. The committee also engages in strategic planning and ensuring sustainability of the project.

## Advisory Committee Members 2020-21

### Executive Team and Founding Members:

**Dianne Gamage (Thailand)**

**Catherine Hart (Australia)**

**Susan Henderson (Australia)**

**Helen Keogh (Thailand)**

**Julia Alden (UK)**

**Dr. Denise Nesbitt (Australia)**

**Dr Phoudalay Lathvilavong (Laos)**

**Dr Tamara Jackman (Australia)**

## A Special Thank You To All Our Sponsors

### our student sponsorship partners

**St Therese's Primary School**

**Holy Family Primary School**

**North Balwyn Rotary Club**

**Maitland Toyota**

### The Veerings

**Amadeus International School, Vienna**

**NIST International School, Bangkok**

**Julia Alden**

**The late Dr John Schiller**



# Covid and Lotus

Fortunately, Laos seems to be doing particularly well with respect to the incidence of COVID. We hear reports from the Lao staff that: hospitals are not over run, they have not heard of any cases of COVID, and no families connected with Lotus have reported COVID infections.

## Lotus Workshop 2021

As a result of COVID, it is unlikely that the volunteer team based outside of Laos will be able to participate in the yearly workshops held by Lotus.

It is also necessary, as a result of COVID, to form a plan that complies with local conditions and still provide the Lotus girls with opportunities to further their journeys as Lotus girls.

Next year, through a series of three weekend workshops, the Lotus girls will be given the chance to develop critical thinking skills and to start thinking about possible future pathways for themselves post high school. Lotus will also provide teaching around critical women's health issues and continue to emphasise the importance of education as a crucial way to improve their future lives.

***Lotus is looking for Donors*** who would be willing to support these workshops. Please contact any members of the Lotus Advisory Committee if you are interested in helping.