

Educate a Girl to Lead the Change



ABN 76 130 576 199

Letter to our Sponsors

It has been a challenging year for the Lotus team and the girls on your program with the added impact of Covid. The younger cohort of girls entered Grade 8 while the older girls completed their first year of post-secondary study. All girls were able to stay on campus until April when the country then went into lockdown. With the support of our Lotus team member Ms Phuang, a 'Big Sister' tutoring program was set up in the villages with a Whatsapp support group for the post-secondary girls. While the presence of the girls back in the village was welcomed as an additional labour force during the busy rice planting session, the girls still diligently worked on their studies.

Fortunately, the Lao government is navigating a successful pathway through Covid and while schools have ended their year early, tertiary institutions are now returning to enable students to complete their final year exams. Irrespective of these external challenges, the strength of our community partnership continues to prevail as evidenced in our ability to retain 24 students of an enrollment of 32 in our secondary school program. Lotus believes that the successful school retention is connected to both the strong in-country partnerships upheld by our local team and the vital role that our Life Skills workshops play in the lives of the Lotus girls.

This year, Lotus welcomed two new team members, Alex Phonsavanh and Phuang Phensysanavong who oversee the entire program in Laos, support teachers and provide mentoring support for our post-secondary students.

Despite the challenges that Covid has brought this year, the workshops have gone ahead successfully and our graduates have continued to study while returning to the village. They were even able to support their families with the farm work and planting while at home. The girls are now back in school preparing for their final exams. All girls have passed their first semester exams and we are confident that they will finish the year successfully and enjoy a well earned summer break helping their families back in their villages.

As always, Lotus is indebted to our faithful sponsors for making this a successful project...for supporting rural Laotian girls' education and empowering them to have choices and agency in their lives



In July, Lotus established an office in Savannakhet. This will provide a central place to coordinate activities, hold monthly mentoring meetings for Lotus scholars, host other essential meetings, safely store equipment and further establish our presence in the local community.

We welcome Phuang Phensysanavong and Alex Phonsavanh to our Lao team

During the next twelve months we look forward to continuing our school support for the 33 girls entering Grade 9, broadening our mentoring partnerships through our Life Skills workshops and supporting local teacher's through pedagogical support. Lotus is very appreciative of everyone who has and continues to support our wonderful program.



Bounma is 14 years old and a member of the Lao Loum ethnic minority group. She lives in Nongkalong Village with her family. Bounma was excited to join the Lotus program when a vacancy became available this year. Bounma is from a family of 4 girls and one son. Her mother is very supportive of the role that education plays in the lives of girls in Nongkalong Village, where other Lotus girls live.

The success of our program in Champhone District is largely attributed to the wonderful work that Ms Toukta continues to do in her role as Community Support worker. Toukta oversees the girls' school attendance, visits families to build up partnerships and provides great mentoring to our younger girls.

If you would like to sponsor a Lotus student entering Grade 9 please visit our website or contact us directly.

Without your support, our programs would not be as successful and we are making a difference albeit a few ripples in the Mekong as evidenced in the words of Somphong below.

Words from our Graduates- 'I'm not sure what the future will bring.'



I'm graduating from my IT program in 2023. Then I'll try to apply to companies in the city, but I know it is difficult to get work (particularly since Covid has impacted the economy so much).

If I can't find work then I'll go back to my village and open a small copy shop where I can use my degree, and be near to my family.

Regardless of where I'm working, I want to encourage younger girls in my village to stay in school. Sadly, so many of them just leave school and either go to Thailand to work and send money home, or get married and start their own families.

Now, with Covid forcing much of the migrant labor pool out of Thailand, many young girls are returning home and getting married anyway. I want to help teach these young married girls how to be smart, earn money for themselves and their families.

If I have the chance to encourage girls who are currently studying, I'll try to impress upon them how the long-term benefits of education are greater than the short term benefits of leaving school to find a job.

My own parents were a role model for me in this way; though my mother never had the opportunity to get an education (her father wouldn't let her go to school; back then, only boys attended), my mother has been my constant champion. She's never once said I should drop out, get a husband, or find a job. In fact, I almost left the Lotus program after I graduated high school, but my mom encouraged me to follow my dreams and go to college.

While my dad made my oldest sister drop out it was more from necessity than a cultural belief that women shouldn't study; he actively pursued Lotus for me. Thankfully, his advocacy for me was how I was first recommended for the Lotus program and this year my younger sister has joined the Lotus program.



Congratulations Phuang!

As our local project coordinator, Phuang is responsible for the college cohort of Lotus girls. Lotus is proud of Phuang as she has been accepted to join a weeklong workshop on creating and implementing community development projects in Laos. Her project proposal, to increase parental involvement in primary school education, was one of just 33 proposals to be accepted out of over 350! Great job!

Lotus is committed to empowering women who then empower women. Phuang is a shining example of a Lotus woman.

The workshop is hosted by Hub R San, and is held in partnership with the US Embassy's YSEALI program, Seeds for the Future, and Cultural Vistas. It's going to be an incredible learning opportunity for Phuang- in addition to the workshop seminars, they'll also be doing site visits to some local NGOs, and they'll have a chance to develop their own project framework- the winning proposal will receive 50,000,000 kip in order to implement. Phuang's proposal was about finding ways to increase parental participation in secondary school education.

The workshop will be from August 14-19. Lotus is so proud of Phuang and we look forward to listening to her post-workshop ideas that could be added to our program.

The Wonderful Lotus Team; Phuang with Alex and Toukar

Life Skills Update/ Entering Grade 8

Lotus Workshop Goal: To build personal strength, health and identity so that girls can flourish and make good choices and decisions for their lives.

Our 2020/21 Life Skills Weekend Workshops for the Grade 8 girls replaced the week-long workshop that has taken place over the last few years. The Lotus international team could not travel to Laos this past year because of Covid. We were fortunate to have donors who sponsored all three of the workshops. Our first Grade 8 workshop took place in December and the second in March. The third workshop was to take place in May, however Laos went into lockdown; schools closed. Our third workshop is now planned for September 2021. Although the international team were disappointed not to be able to carry out the workshops and participate in-country with the girls, our brilliant local team of Alex and Phuang stepped in for the life skills and a local female doctor led the health and hygiene sessions. The local team organized the workshop venue, food, lodging and all activities for the girls in Savannakhet, while the international team planned the workshop content.

Our first two workshops in the life skills sessions continued to focus on developing an understanding of what it means to be a *Lotus Girl*. We always review the workshop goal and the girls themselves develop the agreements by which they conduct their behavior during the weekend. The girls work on becoming better listeners and set personal intentions for how they would like to build their capacities and skills. Much of the work thus far in our workshops have been focused on building self-confidence and personal identity by identifying and applying their strengths and unique qualities. The older graduates have been instrumental in the sessions as *role models*. They are indeed perfect role models for the younger girls and their stories of diligence and perseverance as they journeyed toward secondary school graduation and vocational school or university have been inspiring. Other workshop concepts covered have been around staying in school, which can be a challenge with the on-going need for economic gain or to help families. The girls engage in problem solving around this issue by working with real scenarios that could happen. Our third workshop in September will focus on *Decision Making* and *Peer Pressure*.

In the health and hygiene sessions, the girls spent one weekend looking at the ways that they can take care of their bodies and develop effective *hygiene practices*. This included healthy eating, getting plenty of physical activity and developing effective hygiene habits such as washing hands, showering and brushing teeth. The next weekend focused on *puberty*. The Lotus Workshop may be the only real knowledge and training that the girls get on these important aspects of their development. The physical and emotional changes that the girls go through were discussed and a good portion of the weekend was spent on understanding menstruation and what is happening in the girls' body during this time. Girls learn about good hygiene during period time and also how to make menstruation pads. These topics are reviewed over the course of all workshops to help the girls acquire a solid foundation on their body and how it works during puberty. They will move into the *reproductive cycle* in the upcoming workshop.

We are so lucky to have the older girls who serve as mentors and as workshop assistants for the younger girls. They, of course, have been through many years of the life skills workshops and what better way to promote responsibility and leadership than to have them working as role models and facilitators? It's a powerful model. The Lotus Team truly believes that the life skills workshops make a real difference in the lives of the Lotus girls. While Lotus does provide for their tuition, books and uniforms for motivation to stay in the public school, participating in the life skills and health workshops make that essential difference in helping them to flourish. We hope to be giving them a comprehensive model for wellbeing.

Big Thanks to UNFPA for their support



Big thanks to the UNFPA who donated enough copies of their booklets on puberty for girls and boys (addressing physical changes, moods, and feelings from childhood to adulthood) so that each Lotus girl can receive her own copy at the next workshop!

The first two Lotus Life Skills Workshops have been successfully completed thanks to the kindness of donors; Ms Amy Yao, Ms Liza Rowen and Ms Roberta Ballerin. The third workshop is planned for September. Love this photo complete with hand drawn images of Lotus girls' dreams.



A Year In Photos



In July Alex signed the lease for our Lotus office in Savannakhet



The Studying Never Stops-

Baisy is finishing her first year at SVKU studying Rural Economic Development (International). The first year of the course is taught in English. Baisy has all the lists of English verbs and vocab on her walls and on her ceiling so she can study until her eyes finally close!

Big Sisters' Mentoring Program During Covid

When Laopaid Secondary school was forced to close because of Covid, Baithoy and Noutana stepped in to run weeking tutoring sessions for the younger Lotus girls Tengmo and Khamphone in Khamkaen village. Twice a week the girls provided tutoring support for the girls Lao language studies.



Mentoring in Agriculture



Lotus Mentor Program in action. Vanmany (a John Schiller Scholarship recipient), is mentoring her "little sister" Sy by meeting her at our Lotus workshops and also by visiting her at home. Sy's family live in an area where the salinity of the soil is so high they boil water that has run through the soil to make salt which they can sell.



Sewing Sinhs for Lotus

With five girls enrolled in sewing courses, it seemed imperative to let them practice after school hours with a machine of their own. The girls will use and care for this machine for the next year as they finish their sewing study. As part of the Lotus "Hands Up" policy the girls have offered to sew 17 school sinhs for their "little sisters" which will be given out in September on registration day.

Baituey, helps set up the house sewing machine Lotus recently purchased.



Monthly Meetings with John Schiller Recipients

(first photo: the girls learning about mentorship from Sis Home, youth development worker, Savan Center; second photo: getting hygiene supplies.

Each month the John Schiller scholarship recipients gather for a half day meeting. The meeting content varies monthly, but it's always a good time for Phuang and Alex to make announcements, check in on mentorship relationships with their "little sisters" (the Lotus girls still studying in secondary school), and encourage the girls in their studies. Hygiene products are always made available, so any girl who isn't able to afford soap, shampoo, sanitary pads, toothpaste, or detergent is able to pick up these items as needed.

Mentorship has been a big focus during these meetings, and visiting speakers discuss their lives, choices, and challenges. These speakers are handpicked by Alex and Phuang and are women who have demonstrated perseverance, hard-work, resilience, and other Lotus characteristics in their lives.

(pictured below: Toukata teaches about perseverance, Sis Yo challenged the girls to identify their values and crowned them at the end; last, here's Mouksida being crowned with 'Higher Education')



An Unexpected Hardship

Laos has done a fabulous job of keeping the borders tightly sealed and catching the majority of COVID-19 cases in the mandatory quarantine undertaken by all returning citizens. The brief period of community spread resulted in a 2 month lockdown. Despite this, there has been serious economic devastation as a result of closed borders. Many families either rely on relatives living and working in Thailand, and neighboring countries to send money home. Many relatives also work in the city- in hospitality, and transport industries, all have been severely impacted this year. In addition to the stress already placed on our girls' families, ten of our college girls experienced an additional hardship. After the recent lockdown ended, the girls returned to their room, near the college to discover a thief had broken in and ransacked their place, stealing all their fans, irons, electric cooking pots, sewing supplies, calculators, shoes, and other clothing. The incident was reported, but the police were unable to catch the thief. Lotus assisted the girls in repurchasing the necessary items, but the personal belongings stolen are gone forever.



Dr John Schiller Scholarship-Student Profile

-Noutana Phasouk



At 20 years old Noutana is extremely grateful she was chosen to be part of the Lotus Foundation at the age of seven. It meant that she was not only able to graduate high school, but she was given the chance to go on to University- an opportunity even she admits would have been beyond her means without assistance. Also, if she had been responsible for paying her own registration fees, there would not have been enough money for new school clothes every year, and she certainly would not have been able to afford the textbooks. Supported by Lotus, she was able to get a new uniform every year, and a full set of textbooks necessary for each class every year. As her sister was in the same classroom until 9th grade, they were both able to make use of the textbooks Lotus purchased for her each school year!

Noutana believes the greatest gift Lotus has given her is patience. She's able to persevere in her education, even when things are difficult. In the hard times when she's thought about dropping out, she remembers how fortunate she is to be supported, and to be given this opportunity and it renews her strength. She's extremely grateful to Lotus for all the material and financial support she's received, but also the character building.

For now, Noutana is finishing up her first year studying Japanese at Savannakhet University. She chose this major because she thought it was not as common, and therefore more likely to yield work opportunities after she graduates. It's much harder than she expected it to be (she laughingly admitted that University is nothing like secondary school!) but she's got lots of new friends at Uni who encourage her, and she's grateful for the regular support of Lotus and the monthly meetings where she's able to connect with her old Lotus friends and compare notes. Noutana is dedicated to her choice and ready to finish up this year and prepare for year 2!

Teacher Training Update

Lotus views teachers as critical partners in our efforts to support girls in accessing education and the **North Baldwyn Rotary Club** has kindly donated money for training in 2021. As a result of COVID training has been postponed until October, 2021.

A Special Thank you To All Our Sponsors—without whom our program would not be as successful as it is today

Especially to everyone on our student sponsorship program

St Therese's Primary School, New Lambton

North Balwyn Rotary Club, Victoria

Julia Alden

Ms Roberta Ballerin

Ms Liza Rowen

Ms Amy Yao

Maitland Toyota, Newcastle

The Late Dr John Schiller

Dianne Schiller

The Vearing Family, Adelaide

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