



# Junkyard Dreams

Hope for Child Garbage Workers  
in Phnom Penh

Words and photos  
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Just before I left for Cambodia, a friend invited me to go see the blockbuster hit, *Slumdog Millionaire*. If you've seen the movie, you know it's full of gut-wrenching scenes -- a modern rags-to-riches tale of three children born in the slums of Mumbai, India. Watching images of children dwarfed by trash heaps, shoeless and exhausted, it was uncomfortably close to what I imagined I might witness on my journey.



had been invited by Mrs. Noun Phymean to visit her unique primary school, built in the heart of the municipal dumps of Phnom Penh. Nearly a decade ago, Noun Phymean was walking down a street in Cambodia's capital city. She finished her lunch and tossed her chicken bones into the trash. Seconds later, she watched in horror as several children fought to reclaim her discarded food. After listening to their stories, she knew she couldn't ignore their plight.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Noun founded the **People Improvement Organization**, a no-frills venture that saves kids from the fate of living literally in garbage.

A week later, under a harsh white sun, I find myself shuffling along a dusty road, surrounded by the refuse-mountains of Stung Mean Chey, seeking out the PIO school.

## Before you see it, you smell it.

Smoke from burning rubbish makes the clear day hazy. The wreckage seems to grow like a crop -- it blends to a homogenous, bony beige; accented here or there by a flash of color from a bit of plastic, or glinting glass shards. Recognizable items are ghastly in this context: a dirty grinning doll's head, a broken "Spongebob" trinket, a startlingly shiny ruby shoe. There are goats all around. Nature's garbage-eating machines, they might be in Goat Heaven.

But the sheer vastness of the piles of waste, the complete lack of anything green, and the hard truth that this is where children work, sleep, and eat (if they are lucky enough), makes this closer to a Hell on Earth.



- *Garbage workers don't just scavenge food or objects for their own survival. The focus is on recycling certain metals and fibers which can be sold by the kilo for cash, usually to buy rice and other subsistence items. A child's day of backbreaking labor averages an income of one US dollar or less.*
- *There is no cost for children to attend the PIO school, but parents can't afford to lose the value of their children's labor. That is why PIO not only covers the costs for students, but also provides an offset payment to parents to support remaining family members.*
- *The cost for PIO sponsorship for one child, including meals, clothes, education, supplies, and offset money to parents, is about \$50 US per month.*

<sup>1</sup> As told on CNN's Hero's, June 6, 2008.  
PHOTOS: All photos courtesy of ILA ASPLUND, all rights reserved



## Before you see it, you hear it.

Children laughing. Children singing at the top of their lungs in cacophonous “unison.” More and more children appear, chattering along the road. Some kids dressed in rags, but now some in uniforms: navy blue shorts or skirts and white dress shirts with little official badges on their sleeves.

The school is a humble structure of cement, with two stories and balcony. It’s painted sky blue and covered with primary colored murals of animals, flowers, and numbers. A swath of kids wave and shout HELLO, spilling out the doors. A pile of plastic Crocs® shoes is outside the door, donated from a generous previous visitor. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Feed the Children and Mr. Alex Eucare



### About People Improvement Organization:

(PIO) was established in 2002 by Phymean Noun, and is a non-profit organization run entirely by and for Cambodians. PIO has outreach centres at the city dumpsite, in the slum areas of Phnom Penh and on the outskirts of the city where the people from the slums are being relocated as the city is redeveloped. They run vocational training for girls to become self supporting, improving their quality of life and that of their families.

Visit  
[www.peopleimprovement.org](http://www.peopleimprovement.org)  
to learn more.

Inside, the cave-like rooms glow bluish from within as the sunlight reflects on the swimming-pool paint. The kids are eager and giggly, but well-behaved. They stand at attention when I enter the room along with a group of other foreign visitors. The children await permission to sit down and shout THANK YOU together. They sing to us, answer questions about what they want to be when they grow up, showing off their English.

After visiting class by class we realize the kids on the upper floor have been anxiously awaiting us, to perform the traditional Cambodian dances they have been practicing. By the looks of their skill and concentrated focus, they have been practicing a long time. Then again, it’s possible that these tenacious kids are simply exceptionally quick to learn.

In my few short days of travel in Cambodia, I’d already witnessed many mementos of a history of heartbreak. Just before visiting PIO, I visited Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, a former high school turned prison-camp, where over 17,000 Cambodian children, men, and women were tortured and eventually executed by the Khmer Rouge.





I had passed through the halls of “intake” photographs there, absorbing portrait after portrait of now-extinguished faces. I saw the empty gallows beyond the barbed wire, and stacks of moldering clothing belonging to the dead. I offered a prayer at the Buddhist stupa surrounded by stacks of dry skulls.



But right now, the focused faces of the PIO children as they dance barefoot in their worn school uniforms, with impeccable skill and conviction, uninterrupted by the stray dog wandering in or the staticky stereo -- this is what moves me to tears for the first time on this profound journey.

I imagine the support of brave teachers and mentors that keeps the kids in a classroom instead of filing through rubbish. I imagine the long slender fingers

of the tallest girl dancer, her perfect “mudras” like a dancing Buddha. I imagine she once used those hands to pick through broken glass, and discarded needles. (Many of the kids have experienced this, as their scarred arms and feet show). I imagine her young hands wiping her brow of sweat and grimy smoke. And to see her now: her hands dance like the stems of flowers bending in the wind. And to know that now, every day, those young hands have the chance to hold a pencil and notebook.



**A**fter visiting the primary school, I have the pleasure of interviewing three young women whose lives were forever changed by meeting Noun Phymean and studying at PIO. All of them are older than the primary kids, and instead are participating in the vocational training offered by PIO, which specifically serves teen girls. They have elected training in beauty salon management, computer, and art skills.

They are El Nita, Run Sreyla, and Somaly. They are all shy smiles and as we enter the salon training center of PIO. It's a simple storefront among many others along a busy industrial street. I accompany them through the store, filled with nail polish bottles, hair products, bejeweled accessories, past the dressing areas with large mirrors and high stools, and up the stairs to the offices for our interviews. Their sometimes tearful words are translated by Ms. Sok Sorphoarn, who offers tireless dedication to this challenging work.



Sok Sorphoarn, Translator and Communication Officer for  
People Improvement Organization



## EL NITA, age 15

### My life before PIO

I was born in Phnom Penh into a very poor family so I lived with a little bit of hunger every day. Often our family didn't have rice to eat. Before PIO, I worked picking through garbage every day. I worked many hours there to find items for recycling. When I sold it, I made very little money and gave it all to my mother to buy rice to eat. I have three siblings, and one of my sisters is now studying and living with me at PIO. My parents are living out in the province. My mother is looking after my father because he is very sick.

### Meeting Noun Phymean

One day, when I was about 12 years old, Noun Phymean met me in the garbage dump and explained to me my options outside of being a garbage picker. I felt really satisfied about coming to get an education from PIO. I have old friends here who were also garbage pickers. I have more hope to have a better future, a good job, to be better and stronger. Now my family has rice every month, I have clothes to wear, and education.

### My dreams

I am interested in doing the beauty salon training, because when I was young I wanted to be beautiful. I am interested in beauty. I want to help other children from suffering.

### My vision for the future of women and girls

I want Cambodian girls to try and struggle in their lives and never give up their hope. Try to continue your dreams. I hope that women and girls will be strong enough and have a good future.

### What gives me strength

I have my parents, especially my mother to give me strength. She tells me always to study and never to let poverty come again to me.



## SOMALY age 16

### My life before PIO

I was born in the province far from the city with 10 siblings. We were very poor. We all worked in the field but we didn't own our land, cows, or animals. We were hired to work in the field. My mother was sick, so we decided to move to Phnom Penh to work in the garbage dumps to earn money to treat our mother. Some days we could find things to recycle, but some days we couldn't find anything. I felt very hopeless.

In the garbage dump, I faced many difficulties. My legs were cut by needles and broken bottles. I had scars on my legs. I went back home with no money and no food to eat. I was really upset to go home and find my mother very sick. She passed away about three years ago, she died because of heart and liver disease.

### Life at PIO

Six of my siblings are now studying and living at PIO. When we came to PIO, we had enough rice to eat, food every day, clothes to wear, and education. I now study vocational training at the beauty salon.



### My dreams

I study drawing at PIO. I want to be an art teacher. On Saturdays I have three hours to spend on learning to draw. I love to draw images of people and nature. I am happy when I draw. I want to help the children at PIO to know they have the choice to be an artist. I need to focus on my study to achieve my dream.

### What gives me strength

Miss Noun Phymean and all the teachers at PIO give me strength. Plus my brothers and sisters who encourage me every day and remind me to study hard and explain to me what I should do.

I want all the girls to study hard. Keep on going to support yourselves and your families!

## RUN SREYLA age 21

### My life before PIO

Before I came to PIO, I was living in my province, working in the fields. Only my siblings and I could earn money because our mother was illiterate and our father was sick. We decided to sell our land and our animals in order to treat our father. Before I moved to Phnom Penh, I also worked for people who needed laborers in their home or on their land. Later, I came to Phnom Penh with my siblings. I worked in a factory making very little money. My siblings went to study. I used the little money I made to treat my mother, because she became sick also.

### Meeting Noun Phymean

When I was about 17 years old, my family and I met Noun Phymean and came to her office. Noun Phymean offered to pay for my study, and eventually I became a teacher at the PIO beauty salon. Two years later, my mother passed away. Without Ms. Phymean, I think I might not be alive today. I had no hope before coming to PIO. Ms. Phymean helped to change my life. She always encouraged me to strive for what I have today. Now I also live at PIO, and living here supports my health care and education.

### My greatest accomplishment

I had to strive for all I have today. I can reach my dream now because I am literate – because I can read and write.

### Challenges for women and girls in Cambodia

Women who are illiterate are looked down upon by society. They are seen as inferior. So they can only work in nightclubs or restaurants – they have no choices if they are illiterate. Right now a lot of girls do not have hope. When they have hope, they will try to do something! They will fight for better conditions. Without hope, goals, high expectations, they will end up in the kind of places that society looks down on, like bars and nightclubs.



## My vision for the future of women and girls in the world

Girls need courage from the people around them. I gained courage from Noun Phymean. There are many NGOs today that work to support women and children. If women have a willingness to improve their lives, they can find support.

## My dreams

Before, when I worked in the factory, I never thought of what my dream was. I could only think about how to survive from one day to the next. Now I can think ahead and plan for my future. I am studying finance every day, and I hope that I can use these skills to help the work of Noun Phymean and PIO!



I am told that one of the biggest challenges for some of the kids transitioning from life as garbage pickers into life as students is that they temporarily lose the ability to dream or imagine. Even in sleep, they dream of garbage.

What's amazing is how far some of the children have come in their ability to dream, to have hope, and to have the desire to pass that hope on to others.

This is not a Hollywood movie ending. No one is ending up a millionaire. But many are earning some life-sustaining gifts: literacy, education, community, and most of all, inching ever-closer to that precious and infectious commodity: Hope.