

Living to Make Differences

By Satirat Dam-ampai

A journey always begins with the first step. For Katrine Solhaug, 32 years, her first encounter with racial and religious differences started when she spent her early childhood with local black people under an apartheid, racial segregation system in South Africa in the 1980's. The roads she has later travelled have also brought her to many different corners of the world and continually opened her horizon and interests in the world of global social conscience.

Katrine Solhaug, who hails from Stavanger, cheerfully recalls her vivid memories of her first years in kindergarten with her missionary family in Port Natal of South Africa where she was so pure white and blonde in the middle of all her totally black Zulu friends and other people around her.

"But the only difference between us was just the colour. I remember well that we had great time together even though we were not allowed to," she emphasizes.

Katrine's father, John-Daniel Solhaug is a priest with the Norwegian Church and definitely the one who planted the seed of humanities in her, was there the day we met up with Katrine in Siem Reap.

"We are different in tastes, ideas, and backgrounds. But if we get the same sort of opportunities, we will be not that different," he says.

"Yes, I believe it started there in South Africa," says Katrine.

Extensive traveling

For Katrine, to travel is to live and it has so far lead her to more than 50 countries over the past 12 years. After several years of educations in Norway, Thailand, Malawi, Spain, Mexico, and Nicaragua, with a special active role as a coordinator of the school programmes there, Katrine was in 2007 selected to manage Earthwalkers guesthouse in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Until then, she had only heard of the place as the little town near the big religious complex called Angkor Wat.

"They told me that I would fall in love with Cambodia and get stuck here," Katrine laughs. At the time, she was not that convinced but now she admits that "yeah, they were actually right."



The friendliness of the Cambodian people is one of the reasons that makes her stay and keep coming back to the country. She feels very motivated and willing to do something for the Cambodians among others because it takes so little to change so much and people really appreciate the help they get.

Dad, I will start a school!

Katrine is known to have so many ideas and plans in her head, and eventually takes most of them along into her sleeping mode, even in her dreams. And in the middle of one night in February 2008, her father got a phone call from her saying "I have an idea, Dad, I'm going to start a school!"

After one and a half years managing Earthwalkers, and when the time was ripe, she left to be on her way to pursue her own dreams.

With educational background in

Cambodia to learn by doing and they could also contribute," she adds.

The 3-month course comprises of intensive lectures, social activities, practical lessons, and excursions which are the most important part of the programme. There seems to be no end to Katrine's creativity when it comes to social initiatives. Such as picking up the garbage on Siem Reap roads and get funded from Norway by the kilos they collect. They could raise 1,800 dollars at last and contributed it to build proper classroom floors in a primary school outside of Siem Reap. The school is part of Teaching Cambodian, a project which teaches and empowers local teachers to be better in the long run.

Moreover, all 15 Globalstudies students also have to run Babel guesthouse and make shifts in cleaning the rooms, serving, presenting at the front desk, just as if they were real staffs. Babel, owned by Katrine and her partners, is the place where all students stay and have practical lessons how to operate the business and focus on responsible tourism projects.

What the students say

"It's the experience," comments Thoralf Utsi, a chef and student who murmurs an idea to open his own restaurant in the future.

"For me, this course gives me an introduction to tourism and an understanding of how the business works."

For another student Hilde Marie Kvaløsæter, she would like to be a teacher in responsible tourism, starting an organisation and a guesthouse in Cambodia. But so far, what she has done is teaching English to Cambodians. Of course, people need to get education, she adds.

"All of the big networks that we have got - from hotels, tour companies, bars & restaurants - make it a big opportunity for Norwegians to come and learn. We then have managed to build up a network and cooperation with the Norwegian School of Hotel Management, University of Stavanger so we can offer students a different experience in their studying," Katrine enthusiastically explains the programme and almost every details of it.

Support the staff

Globalstudies is one of the dreams come true for Katrine. Three years of hard work has transformed the idea into a reality and it has been doing better than she ever expected.

"We have just started it, and we are going to make it grow," she says. For Katrine, working 18 hours a day doesn't drain her energy from other possible actions. Next, it is Babel Educational Programme.

It is a project that guests can contribute and it supports Babel's staffs for their better educations. So far, they already have two to three sponsors that would like to help one of the staffs for one year at Paul Dubrulle, a hotel and tourism school in Siem Reap.

The fortunate staff they sponsor is a man who today works at the front office during the day time. Katrine explains that he used to live in the garbage dump in Phnom Penh for almost ten years before he struggled his way up to Siem Reap where he found work at the Sala Bai hotel for a year. During that time, he was sent to learn managing skills and later he moved to be with Babel.

"We also want him to grow because he has so much potential and Paul Dubrulle would eventually give him more opportunities. Then he has to move on to the star hotel," Katrine says.

Some other staffs such as housekeeping girls can also benefit from English class three times

a week, then they could move step by step to better positions at the guesthouse. One former staff has also been supported and now studying Psychology in a university in Bangkok.

Solhaugfond

In addition, Katrine and her father also set up the Solhaugfond to support projects that provide a brighter future for young Cambodians. They manage to collect 12,000 dollars on his 60th birthday in Norway which they later handed over to Sangkheum Center for children to be used to prepare the young adults to advance in the real working world.

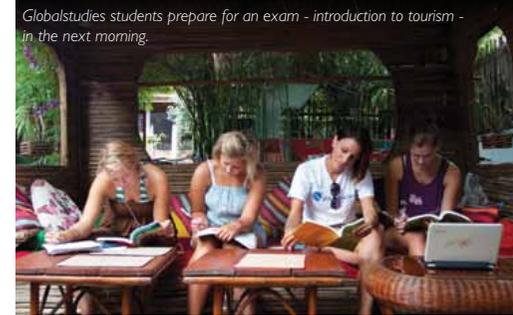
"One of the important reasons that keeps me here is that we see how easy it is to make a difference in people's lives," says Katrine.

"We are from Norway, one of the richest countries in the world. And I feel like at least we can contribute with our knowledge, money, and network. I think I wouldn't live properly if I couldn't do something with all the resources in my hands."

"The main goal is that we can make a difference here, and also open up eyes and minds to Norwegians. Yes, I want Norwegians to get out and make a difference," she adds.



Classroom atmosphere and the students can take a break at a swimming pool.



Globalstudies students prepare for an exam - introduction to tourism - in the next morning.



Babel bar and restaurant atmosphere

Working 18 hours a day doesn't drain her energy from doing a good deed for people. Here, she is clearing bill and all administration papers before leaving to Phnom Penh.