



**EAGLES
SUPPLY FIRE
FIGHTERS/2C**



**CONTRA
DANCES
LIVE/3C**



**CYCLIST'S
CONTINENTAL
JOURNEY/8C**



Students interact with Barry Grant in February as he teaches English in a school in the Cambodian village of Tuol Srov. The students sit in desks and use books provided by Grant and his wife, Vecie. Contributed photo

Their hearts are in Cambodia

Couple adopts tiny school in Cambodian village

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

Never underestimate the power of one – or two. Barry and Vecie Grant may seem an unlikely dynamic duo. Barry left his job as a social worker in 2007 because of a degenerative eye disease. He retains some peripheral vision, but when he looks straight ahead, he sees only darkness. Vecie finished her career as a special education teacher at Hermiston's Sandstone Middle School in 2011. They seemed a couple ready to settle down and enjoy their retirement years.

When the Pendleton couple took a trip to Cambodia in 2015, however, something changed their whole trajectory. They fell in love with a tiny, poverty-stricken village called Tuol Srov (pronounced towel-shrove). Since then, they have raised funds for school supplies, desks and two wells. They teach English there three months out of every year. They plan to replace the village's ramshackle school.

To understand the Grants' passion for their adopted village, one must actually go back a few decades. This journey started 30 years earlier when Vecie taught English to a Cambodian man named Phat Ong in Pendleton. Ong had fled Cambodia in 1979 during the deadly regime of Pol Pot, arriving in Northeast Oregon in 1982. Grant taught English at Blue Mountain Community College, guiding Ong as he doggedly increased his command of the language. Grant encouraged Ong to write his personal story in English and when he did, she read with fascination. In the Missouri-sized country during the brutal four-year Khmer Rouge period, about 1.5 million people died from starvation, disease or execution. Ong escaped to Thailand and then to the United States. Despite the horrors, Ong missed much about home.

"Phat kept telling me, 'I want you to go see my country – it's so beautiful,'" Grant said.

Ong eventually bought a Pendleton doughnut shop (now Up with Donuts) and began earning money to bring family members from Cambodia to Pendleton. Grant taught them English, too, along with other Cambodians. She also schooled them in American culture. Currently, a Cambodian family of four lives in the Grants' basement.

The Grants' connection with Pendleton's Cambodian community grew stronger and stronger. Finally



A little girl hugs Vecie Grant after Grant and her husband, Barry, presented her school in Tuol Srov, Cambodia, with white boards. The Grants previously presented the school with supplies, uniforms and backpacks and are raising money to build a new school building. Contributed photo

in 2015, they went to see Cambodia for themselves. They didn't go empty-handed.

"I told Phat I don't want to just go there," Vecie said. "I want to make life better."

"Education is what's going to change my country," Grant remembers him telling her.

So she and Barry flew to Cambodia and once there bought \$750 in school supplies, uniforms and backpacks to give as a goodwill gesture. Relatives of Cambodians they knew in Pendleton watched over the Grants during the Cambodia visit and advised about which school to present the gifts. One suggestion was Tuol Srov, a village of run-down shacks and a couple hundred villagers. When they visited, the poverty took their breath away. Most men make the equivalent of two to five dollars per day farming rice during the wet season. During the dry season, many work the fields in Thailand.

The village's five-room school house seemed dilapidated to the point of being dangerous.

"The roof was metal and had more holes than metal," Barry said. "Some of the holes were a foot-and-a-half around."

The school also contained no technology or books and not enough desks. When the Grants presented

their gift of school supplies, it didn't feel like nearly enough.

"We had not even scratched the surface of what these people needed," Vecie said.

One elderly villager asked them if they would build a school. The idea marinated for a while in their brains. When they returned home, they created a nonprofit called the Cambodian Rural School Fund to handle donations for a new school with an estimated cost of \$45,000. They also saved money to buy desks and two wells for fresh water – one at the school and another about half a mile away for all the villagers.

When the Grants returned to Cambodia this January, they arranged for a trusted Cambodian civil engineer friend to make purchases and deal with the government for necessary permits. One wealthy Cambodian man offered to donate 3,000 bricks for the walls, a value of \$1,200, for the project. The Grants committed \$10,000 of their own money and others donated as well. They figure there is about \$15,000 left to raise. A board oversees the little nonprofit. The Grants said none of the funds raised will go to administration or travel expenses.

The new school will have three classrooms, a teacher's room and a detached bathroom. The school's roof will be tile instead of metal.

"When it rains, they'll be able to hear themselves think," Vecie said.

During the most recent trip, they oversaw the drilling of two wells and purchased additional desks and some white boards. They taught English to students and teachers. Vecie said knowing English will give the children opportunity to work in the tourist industry and eventually go to college.

In March, villagers gathered to celebrate the school's new well, fenced to keep water buffalo away. Barry grinned as he listened to some boys cavorting in the water and he tilted his head to get a blurry glimpse. Vecie felt emotional when she saw a mother and baby standing under the stream. As water gushed over them, the baby gurgled happily. It is moments such as these that keep the Grants committed to spending three months out of every year teaching English in Cambodia for the next 10 years.

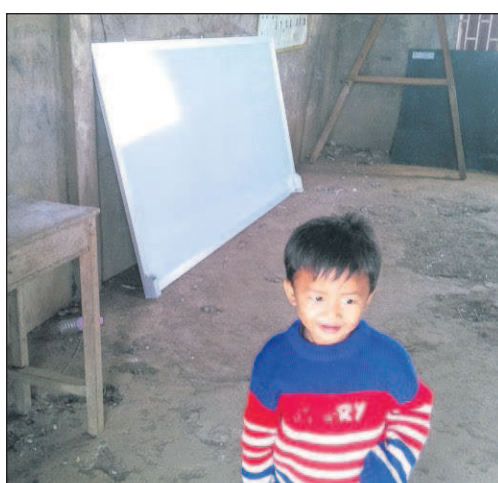
"As long as we continue to be healthy," Barry said.

Those wanting to support the school project can donate via PayPal by going to <https://cambodianrural-school.wordpress.com/2016/07/> or writing a check to the Cambodian Rural School Fund and mailing it to 1833 S.W. Athens Ave., Pendleton, OR 97801.

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or call 541-966-0810.



Barry Grant takes a sip of water from a well he and his wife Vecie helped to finance at a school in Tuol Srov, Cambodia. Photo by Vecie Grant



A young boy stands inside a classroom of a deteriorating five-room school. Propped against the wall, a white board is ready to be mounted. Contributed photo



Barry Grant smiles as he watches boys frolic in water gushing from a new well in the tiny Cambodian village of Tuol Srov. The well was financed by Grant, his wife, Vecie, and other donors. Contributed photo