



Barbara Seagram, left, and Patti Lee launched the Southeast Asia Support Organization to fund much-needed programs in Cambodia. LAURA PROCTOR/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Building schools and health programs in Cambodia

Organizers raise more than \$100,000 a year to fund the initiatives, including clean water

PAUL WALDIE

PITCHING IN

The organizers: Patti Lee, Barbara Seagram and Alex Kornel

The pitch: Creating the Southeast Asia Support Organization

The cause: To fund education and health programs in Cambodia

Retired nurse Barbara Seagram has been a leading figure in the world of bridge for decades. She's written nearly 40 books on the game and ran a club in Toronto with her husband Alex Kornel that was one of the largest in North America.

Ms. Seagram and fellow bridge enthusiast Patti Lee also organize cruises and travel tours for

bridge players. Several years ago they were planning a trip to Vietnam and Cambodia when they came across a Canadian teacher at a school in Cambodia who was trying to buy bicycles for students.

"We found out it was only 50 Canadian dollars a bike," Ms. Lee, 79, recalled from her home in Toronto where she used to work for IBM Canada. "We thought, that sounds like a good thing for us to do. And so we started raising money."

They delivered 40 bikes during the bridge tour in 2011 but quickly discovered a greater need.

The school had no desks or chairs and a hole in the floor which served as a toilet. "We said to each other: 'They don't need bikes. They need a school,'" Ms. Lee said.

The women began a fundraising campaign among bridge colleagues and raised \$24,000 to build a new school. They didn't stop there.

They created the Southeast Asia Support Organization and started raising money for more schools and health programs.

They've built four schools so far that instruct 525 students and employ 14 teachers and librarians. The schools augment the state system by specializing in subjects such as English, hygiene and computer skills.

The non-profit organization has also installed toilets and hand-washing stations in 32 schools and 60 villages; and they've improved access to clean water at 26 health centres. They also work on local projects with an American charity, the Banyan Tree Organization, and they are connected to the Canadian Landmine Foundation.

Ms. Lee and Ms. Seagram, 76, raise more than \$100,000 annually to fund the programs and they take turns visiting Cambodia every year.

"It's very heartwarming," Ms. Lee said of the growth of the organization.

"When I stand back and realize what we've actually done, it even kind of astounds me. Because it started very small and you can see how much it helps the community."

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