

Bringing HOPE to rural villages

Residents help
open new
school in Laos

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Metroland photographer/reporter Karen Longwell visited projects with the Port Hope based charitable organization Adopt a Village in Laos, southeast Asia, in January. This is part two of a three-part series.

A school gives a whole village hope, according to Steve Rutledge, founder of Adopt a Village in Laos.

Hope appeared to be on the faces of young students who formed two lines welcoming guests at the official school opening at Hat Kham village on Jan. 12. As government officials and Adopt a Village in Laos directors Linda Goldie and Hugh Parker from Port Hope walked up the path from the river shore, students placed their hands together and said "Sabaidee" (greetings).

"Everyone was so welcoming and warm," said Ms. Goldie after the visit.

The school is located in a small hill tribe village on the Nam Ou River in northern Laos, accessed only by boat. Recently road construction was attempted through the mountainous region but abandoned when unexploded ordnances were found, remnants of the American bombing of the region in the 1960s and 1970s, said Siphon Phanthavong, assistant/co-ordinator with Adopt a Village.

Approximately 80 million unexploded bombies or cluster bombs remained in Laos after the war, according to Laos Nation Unexploded Ordnance organization. Laos has never truly recovered and that is why Port Hope residents Mr. Rutledge and Mike Yap decided to help the communities.

"They never had a chance with all these bombings," said Mr. Rutledge.

Entire families hid in caves across Laos during the war.

The Hat Kham school opened in the fall 2012 for approximately 68 students from Grade 1 to 5, said Mr. Rutledge. The school replaced



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LAOS -- Students do traditional dances at the Hat Kham Primary School opening celebration on Jan. 12.

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Hugh Parker,
Adopt a Village in
Laos director



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LAOS -- Nong Bokham Secondary School students look out at the building of the second phase of the school.



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LAOS -- The children of Hat Kham village line the pathway to the village for guests arriving to the school opening celebration on Jan. 12.

the old building, which collapsed in a monsoon, he said. The official opening, complete with a speech from the governor for the district, student dance performances and food, was held Jan. 12.

The school was built with sponsor Jai Lao, an American organization, and donors from Northumberland and Durham Region.

Linda Goldie and Hugh Parker donated funds for 15 school desks, all as Christmas gifts for their five adult children. Seeing the desks with their children's names on plaques was emotional, said Ms. Goldie.

The school projects open a pathway for children and give young people new opportunities, said Mr.

Parker. The school is uplifting for the entire village, he added.

"The biggest thrill is you give hope ... to humankind, hope is the ultimate driver," he said.

Ms. Goldie said it is most important not to change or attempt to westernize the communities. Adopt a Village brings the basics to communities in need.

"It's clean water, toilets and education," she said.

Toilets were set up at the back of the school with the help of the Rotary Club of Whitby Sunrise, of which Mr. Rutledge is a member.

The new Hat Kham school is surrounded with gardens and fencing. Children played on grounds built for two traditional Laos sports -- a type of volleyball game called Kataw where players can use their feet to kick but no hands; and Pateng, a game similar to bocce ball.

The school is just one example of

the education projects Adopt a Village has developed in Laos. Another project is a secondary school built in Nong Bokham, a 45-minute drive, partly on a dirt track, from the city of Luang Prabang. The government has moved 300 families to the region in attempt to stop opium production, said Mr. Rutledge.

Students filled the two rooms working on exams on Jan. 16. A sign just outside the door lists residents from Northumberland who supported the build. As the students worked, construction continued on an expansion to the school. The two new rooms will support the 300 families who have moved to the village, said Mr. Rutledge.

Part three in the series looks at the unique bacì ceremony, a way of saying thank you in Laos. For more on Adopt a Village in Laos, visit the website at <http://adoptavillagein-laos.wordpress.com>