

Saying Thanks to Durham donors

Laos people perform Baci ceremony

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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 three of a three-part series.

Tiny fish cook on a fire inside the kitchen of a home in the village of Soup Khong.

The village residents have just received water filters from the Port Hope-based charity Adopt a Village in Laos. Donors from Durham, Northumberland and across Canada and the United States support the charity. A look inside this typical home makes it clear the average villager has little besides the basics. There is no running water, no appliances.

But villagers want to thank donors for work done to help build schools,

bring in clean water filter systems and toilets.

"We don't have much so we invite you to the baci ceremony," said a village elder in Nam Khan through a translator.

The ceremony is unique to Laos and at times difficult to understand. Baci is a ceremony to celebrate a special event, such as a marriage, a homecoming, a welcome, a birth, or one of the annual festivals, according to the Laos Heritage Foundation. It is sometimes referred to as *su kwan*, which means "calling of the soul."

During a visit to Adopt a Village from Laos projects, founders Steve Rutledge and Mike Yap and directors Hugh Parker and Linda Goldie were invited to baci ceremonies in three villages -- Soup Khong, Hat Kham and Nam Khan. The villages are all in the northern region of Laos.

In each village, participants were invited into a room, in a community centre, school or home. A silver platter with flowers, food and white strings on sticks was in the centre. Guests were invited to sit in a circle around the platter. A village elder welcomed visitors and said a prayer. Villagers then stood up and



KAREN LONGWELL PHOTOS / METROLAND

LAOS -- Adopt a Village in Laos director Hugh Parker receives a string during the Baci ceremony in Phonesavan. The ceremony was the community's way of saying thank you for water filters.



tied the white cotton strings around the guests' wrists. Dozens of people participated and each spoke to the guests while tying the strings.

Nam Kahn resident Dom Phommalin said the villagers wish the guests good health and luck for the future. The baci strings should stay on the wrist for at least three days, said Mr. Yap. In Laos, white is the color of peace, good fortune, honesty and warmth, according to the Laos of Heritage Foundation.

At the closing of the ceremony everyone touches the silver plate while the elder says more prayers or mantras.

After the ceremony, everyone shares a meal and a very strong whiskey called Lao Lao is passed around the room. Guests are encouraged to drink beer and eat meat and sticky rice.

The chance to join in the baci ceremony was a wonderful experience for first-time visitors Ms. Goldie and Mr. Parker.

"I was moved by the chance to participate in the ceremonies," said Ms. Goldie. "It's been wonderful."



LAOS -- Adopt a Village in Laos director Hugh Parker, left, and founder Steve Rutledge get ready to drink Lao Lao, a type of rice whiskey after the Baci ceremony in Hat Kham.



LAOS -- A woman cooks fish in a small home in Soup Khong. There is no running water in homes and generally no appliances.

For more on Adopt a Village in Laos, visit the website at <http://adoptavillageinlaos.wordpress.com>