

From stateless refugee to school-builder

Laotian uses proceeds from his memoir to boost education facilities in village back home

Ian Poh

In September, former refugee Sanva Saephan launched a 219-page memoir of his experiences to raise money to build a primary school back home in Laos.

Just over three months later, the single-storey building in Ban Nam Tong village in north-western Laos – a 45-minute drive from Mr Saephan's family home in Ban Bokeo village – has now been completed and handed over to the local community to run.

Built at a cost of US\$45,000 (S\$57,000), it includes five classrooms and a library, and replaces a run-down structure which had walls that threatened to collapse. The new building can hold 250 students, up from the 95 currently enrolled.

The children will no longer have to share rooms with pupils of different levels. Yet it is uncertain if their education will take the same path as Mr Saephan, who moved to Singapore in 2003 on an Asean scholarship.

The 26-year-old studied at Xinmin Secondary School and Meridian Junior College, and joined Credit Suisse bank as an operations analyst last year after his graduation from the Singapore Management University.

"Many local villagers I spoke to were full of hopes and aspirations," said Mr Saephan in an e-mail interview with The Sunday Times. "They do not have the same opportunities others do. Education is the best way to help."

Mr Saephan, who calls Singapore his "second home", has applied for permanent residency here.

But for the first seven years of his life, home was the Ban Vinai and Napho camps in north-east Thailand. His parents had fled across the Mekong River in 1980, fearing persecution by the communist government that had recently come to power.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BEN PARSONS
 Mr Saephan speaking at the handing-over ceremony for the school building (top) in Ban Nam Tong village in Laos that he funded with the proceeds from his book.

The link

"Through such projects, I want to be the bridge between Singapore and Laos... I hope to give Singaporeans chances to see the livelihood of the villagers in my home country, as this will help them appreciate how blessed they are."

MR SANVA SAEPHAN, a former refugee from Laos

Life included bathing in a river and eating food rations handed out by the United Nations, before his family was eventually repatriated home.

Some of the memories are captured in his book, *Stateless: Diary Of A Spirited Boy At Napho Camp*, which was compiled from his diary entries. Mr Saephan started writing them while preparing for his O-level examinations in 2005.

The book, which has sold more than 1,800 copies so far, is available at bookstores here for \$15.

Mr Saephan hopes to publish a second memoir next June and use funds received from its sale for more community projects in Laos. "Through such projects, I want to be the bridge between Singapore and Laos.

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pohian@sph.com.sg