

# Trailblazer Foundation



## Making a difference one step at a time

When Scott and Chris Coats' daughter left home to go to college they wondered how they would fill in their days. Being empty nesters did not come easily. They had a history of community work dating back to their high school days. Some of their most gratifying work had been as foster parents and later as certified parent therapists under a Wyoming State pilot project dealing with high risk teenagers. Over 7 years they fostered 20 children.

When their daughter took off for college they quit their jobs to participate in projects in Fiji, Samoa, New Zealand and a number of other countries. After that, in 2002, they visited Cambodia and realised there was a great need for assistance to rural areas outside Siem Reap. They knew then they wanted to return.

They returned with their daughter the following year and spent two months researching how they could help. They met government officials, committed to a project in Siem Reap Province and established Trailblazer Foundation in 2004.

Sras village was identified as one of the poorest of 100 villages in the Siem Reap area which desperately needed assistance. This rural village, about 40 kms north-west of Siem Reap, had limited access to medical care, no school, no developed water resources, minimal agriculture and due to flooding during the rainy season was cut off by road from September to January each year. Only 18 out of 550 children had ever attended school and 79% of men and 92% of women were illiterate. Until the Khmer Rouge had gone these people lived in the jungle afraid to come out. They were subsistence farmers, and did not grow enough rice to sustain them.

Scott and Chris realised they needed a local person as a contractor. They found Rattana, a former school teacher and he became their middle man. Ownership by locals working with communities is key to the success of their programs.

Their first project was education but they quickly realised that access to clean water was a priority. "Bad water is the cause of illness, malnutrition and poverty" said Chris. "When the water quality is good then other developments can take place to improve commerce and establish sustainable commerce.



Chris Coats



Scott Coats

"Child deaths due to waterborne illness can be so easily prevented. Bad water has ongoing impacts causing loss of wages and impacts on the whole family." The pit wells used by the villagers are not a safe source of water and it is vital that water be treated before being consumed.

Trips back to the US to raise funds were necessary. Rotary grants enabled them to provide 72 wells and 80 water filters to this village. World Vision donated sewing machines to train local women to sew, enabling them to earn a small income. Agreements with the villagers were signed and women contracted to contribute 50% of the value of the machine into the village fund.

Chris says "The philosophy of don't just give them fish but rather teach them how to fish is behind all our work. Trailblazer helps establish central village funds that give residents an opportunity to start a micro loan program to create small businesses, purchase livestock, make home improvements, pay for medical care and more. These loans provide capital development funds that build equity and sustain projects."





*Children pumping  
clean water*

The next decision was to start a village garden. The village chief decided to give the 24 top local farmers some seeds and see which ones grew best. They shared this knowledge before starting a community garden. Trailblazer's agricultural program had begun.

In February 2006 Scott and Chris were introduced to Rahul Singh, of GlobalMedic; he had been involved with the bio-sand water filter training program and donated a water filter mould to Trailblazer Foundation. The Trailblazer bio-sand water filter program was born.

With the help of a few volunteers, Scott and Chris constructed and delivered about 300 water filters to rural families in the first year. To date they have distributed over 4,000 filters to rural families, schools and pagodas providing access to clean water to nearly 100,000 people.

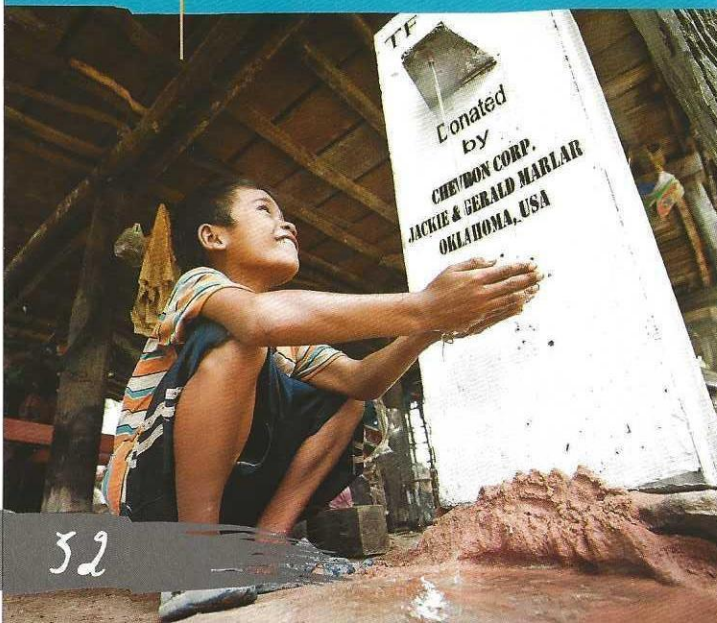
The operation of the filters is simple with water travelling through a layer of biologically active sand and gravel which traps and degrades sediment, parasites and 98% of bacteria. The villagers are trained to operate the filters and a pamphlet translated into the Khmer language is distributed explaining the whole process.





Delivering a water filter is not always easy

Bio-sand water filter



Williams "Ratanak" So  
Trailblazer Foundation  
Field Director



Other Trailblazer projects include well drilling and repair, promoting healthy and energising food, teaching agriculture and helping rural villagers in practical ways such as supplying much needed goods including mosquito nets, rice, bikes and solar units.

Although not their main area of assistance Trailblazer Foundation has also assisted in the construction of 4 schools and a library.

The Foundation uses a grassroots approach in their work, empowering people by using hands-on participatory practices to ensure the sustainability of projects. They also believe it is vital to create pride and ownership of projects enabling a sustainable future whilst retaining local culture. Working from the bottom up is vital to their success in the long term.

In 8 years, the work by Scott and Chris, together with volunteers and their enthusiastic staff, headed by field director Ratanak, has greatly improved the lives of many of the Sras villagers. Trailblazer Foundation best practice is being adopted by other projects around the world. The struggle for funds is ongoing, as in many other projects, however partnering with other NGOs has been one of their keys to success.

Trailblazer Foundation strives to preserve the cultural integrity of the villages they are involved with. Working towards the future with a participatory model they empower communities to find sustainable solutions to their most pressing needs. The ambition of the Coats family is that their Cambodian team become confident in their ability to manage projects and programs and to stand on their own.

For more information visit  
[www.thetrailblazerfoundation.org](http://www.thetrailblazerfoundation.org)



