

# Canadian Kindness Felt in Faraway Cambodia

BY BRENT MANLEY

Most people in the bridge world know Barbara Seagram as one of the top teachers, a prolific author and an intrepid tour guide. What's not so well known is how far she will go to help her fellow mankind.

About three years ago, Seagram and fellow tour guide Patti Lee discovered a need in Cambodia and went into action. Today, they and their supporters sustain the operations of four schools in the Phnom Penh area, paying for electricity, supplies (including computers) and the salaries of teachers and librarians.

Funds to help run the schools come from the bridge players of Canada. "We couldn't do it without them," says Lee, a retired IBM account executive who took up teaching and directing bridge after leaving the company. Lee has traveled with Seagram for 20 years, organizing and escorting bridge groups in various parts of the world.

Seagram and Lee lately have directed their attention to the construction of a health clinic, which they estimate will cost \$50,000. Seagram is gratified at what she and the bridge players of Canada have managed so far, but she is realistic: "There's so much that needs to be done."

Patti Lee, fellow school supporter Pauline Johns of Australia and Barbara Seagram at one of the schools they sustain in Cambodia. With them is Chamnap, the main teacher at the school.

Important to the mission is maintaining outreach programs at the schools, which are often centers for their communities. Says Seagram, "We try to help people become self-sufficient through some of the programs: teaching people how to be chicken farmers, helping set up bike shops, teaching women to sew and helping them get jobs."

Seagram, who lives in Toronto, is originally from Barbados. She left her home country in 1966 to attend the University of New Brunswick. She taught nursing at Women's College Hospital in Toronto, retiring from that job in 1975. At the urging of her former mother-in-law, Seagram took bridge lessons at the Kate Buckman Bridge Studio, which she would later own. She started helping out right away and began teaching the game in 1978. She purchased the club 12 years later. She and her husband, Alex Kornel, ran the club until selling it in 2006.

As a club owner and manager, Seagram pioneered the Zero Tolerance policy that was officially adopted by the ACBL Board of Directors. At its peak, the Kate Buckman club logged 12,000 to 13,000 tables a year with 25 sessions of bridge per week.

In the 30 years that she and Kornel have hosted bridge tours and cruises, Seagram reckons they have visited about 155 countries. On many of the trips, Seagram says, it was hard not to notice poverty and need among the people they encountered.

At one point, Seagram and Lee started encouraging tour participants to pack their suitcases with things that would be valued by the people of the countries they would visit. Seagram says toothbrushes and toothpaste are important items, but pens, paper and toys are also popular.

Along the way, they met a Canadian woman – Lisa McCoy of Gravenhurst ON – who spends six months a year in







Cambodian students in a tuk-tuk on their way to school.

Cambodia, much of it in remote villages where people have been maimed by some of the 5 million land mines in the country, the remnants of three decades of war.

The impetus for the school projects, Seagram says, occurred after she and the bridge players of Canada raised enough money to buy 40 bicycles for the children of a village not far from Phnom Penh. They had heard about the need from McCoy.

Seagram and Lee went on the trip to present the bicycles at a village school. "It was a falling-down shack," Seagram says. Lee adds, "Barbara and I looked at each other and said, 'They don't need bikes; they need a school.'"

Money is raised in special bridge games – several each year – organized by Seagram and Lee in the Toronto area. Of the four schools they sustain, one was built with funds from those games. Canadian money also paid for a library added to an existing school. The four schools serve 550 children. It costs about \$12,000 a year to operate the schools, and that money comes from special games, raffles, teaching

sessions and donations. McCoy manages all the money raised by Seagram, Kornel and Lee.

So far, through fundraising games and donations, Seagram and Lee have collected \$120,000 for the projects.

Not satisfied with fundraising, Seagram and Lee take turns going to Cambodia to teach English, mostly using pictures and matching words. "We also tell stories and act them out,"

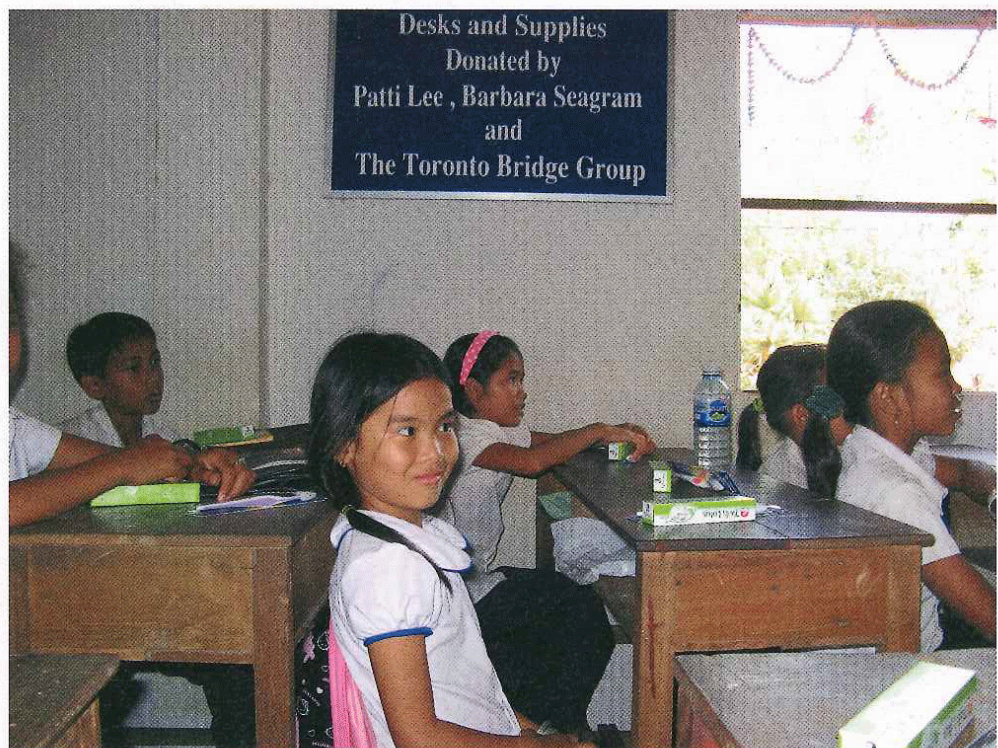
she notes. "The last time, I was a goat in one of the stories." Earlier this year, Lee used hand puppets for teaching the language.

Seagram treasures her time with the students. "They are such beautiful children."

Lee says that seeing the poverty firsthand affected her deeply. "It tugged at our hearts so much," she says, "that we thought we had to do more."

On trips back to Cambodia, she says, it's obvious that their efforts have paid off. "It's not a lot of money," she notes, "but it does a lot."

*Donations to the Cambodia projects can be made to A Mine Free World Foundation, c/o Barbara Seagram, 220 Lawrence Avenue East, Toronto ON M4N 1T2 Canada.*



Cambodian students at a school sustained by Canadian funds.