

Return from Cambodia



When I last wrote to Limbs 4 Life I was Cambodia bound, and now on my return I have some very memorable experiences to share. My mission in Cambodia was to design and manufacture a racing wheelchair for the disabled. Although they did have racing wheelchairs that created some keen competition, they were outdated and inadequately designed.

So there I was in Cambodia, equipped with the latest designs in track chairs. The workshop I was to use to manufacture the stage two racing wheelchair was the Don Bosco Technical Vocational School in Phnom Penh. This is a technical school that caters for orphans and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The students do around 60% classroom studies and 40% in the area of their choice, the areas they can choose from are welding, automotive, sheet metal, electrical, printing and engineering workshop. The students study for two years and are in great demand on graduation.

Because of a student changeover during my first week I was mainly working with teaching staff, this enabled the production of the prototype chair to move along a little quicker than expected. By the end of the second week the new chair was ready for testing.



The wheelchair training starts at 5am and finishes at 7am, the early start is essential as the training takes place on normal roads, therefore at this hour there is not too much traffic about! On Monday morning several of the athletes trialed the chair and were very impressed with its performance, but disaster struck, one of the athletes did a U turn in front of an oncoming motorbike and the front end of the chair was crushed. Fortunately no one was harmed, but it was a long walk back to the apartments holding the front wheel off the ground.

So, back to Don Bosco for repairs. On the chairs completion the Athletes spent the following three weeks testing the chair at distances of 25 kilometres a day. To cater for the individual differences of the athletes I also designed customised bolt on foot rests and strapping loops to hold the athletes safely in. The track chair is now back at

Don Bosco and a final production plan has been set in place. While the testing was taking place I became involved in an Armed Art project, this involved cutting up destroyed AK 47 machine guns and turning them into sculptures representing peace. One of the sculptures was a meter high kangaroo which I believe will be coming to Australia later this year. Another sculpture I worked on was of an amputee playing volleyball. A huge playground system had also been built for a landmine rehabilitation orphanage centre, and guess who was given the job to erect it? Val, the new site manager!



A truck with a crane on it was hired to move the playground structure. One of the men who was hired with the truck sat on top of the load, which was about five meters high, to my horror he stayed on the top of the load as the truck picked up live wires and moved forward, he would walk along the load and drop the wires over the back, this happened eight times on the trip!

At the orphanage centre was a group of Melbourne students on a school trip to participate in some charity work. Together with the students at the centre they helped me dig holes and when the structure was unloaded they also helped bolt it together.

The following day, my wife Joan myself and the children finished off the structure in very muddy conditions, due to heavy rain over night. Joan's job was to assemble the stairs and a wooden ramp, but you could hardly see her for her little helpers as they followed her around like a mother hen handing her bolts, nuts and spanners. On completion came the time to try it out, and the children swarmed all over it.



The next moment brought a tear to our eyes. The entire structure was covered in mud, and after the children had played on it for a while, they began collecting little bottles of water and proceeded to wash the whole thing down. Just beautiful.

It was a trip that Joan and I will cherish.

*Val Sutherland
Volunteer*

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