

the PROMISE of SOCIAL WORK to TRANSFORM the PRESENT

celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the DSW



- *145 BSW graduates in the workforce*
- *249 local NGO staff participated in DSW continuing education courses, enhancing their case management and care coordination skills*
- *The DSW is the only Cambodian college program to receive any form of external accreditation (May 2017) from the Philippines Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities*

Partnership Website

<http://socialwork.uw.edu/programs/cambodia-partnership>

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For privacy, all names are have been changed and photos are of BSW students but do not represent the individuals whose stories are shared.

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the voices of graduates & current students



“Getting out of poverty is hard, you can fail a lot.”

Leakhena knows from firsthand experience about the difficulty. At age 15, she was on the streets begging. The trauma of this experience came back to her in Years 1-2 of the BSW program as she delved into courses focused on the consequences of poverty, reflected on her own identity, positionality and privilege. She realized then that even though she no longer was on the streets, these experiences along with the BSW program would deepen her ability to connect with others who are marginalized and oppressed.

“I want to connect art with helping people. Originally I had found an art therapy program in Chiang Mai but not here in Cambodia. Then I heard about social work and realized I want to be a professional social worker, I want to give back. Social work builds community, finds justice and fairness. I would like to help people find justice.”

“The field learning in the SW degree program is great. So many people graduate with no experience, they need on-the-job training. Our BSW program provides a lot of hours to gain experience, apply what we learn in the classroom. This also helps to build confidence so when we graduate we are ready to work.”

~ current BSW Year 3 student

A member of the 1st class of BSW graduates, **Sophal** received the Mara Schneiders Year 4 Field Supervisor award in 2017. The award is given to a supervisor who demonstrates strong support of social work learning with students placed at their agency.

“Our job (as field learning supervisors) is to expose students to other activities, and inspire them to have passions and life goals. I went to primary and secondary schools where teachers were not student centered, I was bullied, teachers didn’t care, I wasn’t engaged by them. Social work (education) changed my life. I had an opportunity to talk, to share my opinion, and begin to learn about myself, who I was deep inside. I loved asking questions. My family was poor but I still remember one day when I was 7 or 8 seeing all of these kids begging. This image stuck with me, I want to end children begging in Cambodia. We need to create change.”

“I see a lot of limitations in programs in Cambodia. They are task based, not results based, not empowering. The NGO is like a burger rather than a fishing pole. Originally we gave scholarships and just focused on the student. Then we looked at the context and understood if we ignored the family then we would not change the larger system. We need to be rights based, follow a principle to do no harm, respect the people we work with.” ~ BSW graduate



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“No one in my rural village knew or still knows about social work. It sounded like something that would support people so that’s why I chose it. I guessed it might be a major that helps people.”

Neth is the 7th of 8 children from a poor rural village family far from Phnom Penh. He is the first to graduate from university. He was very lucky to have an uncle who brought him to Phnom Penh when he was accepted on scholarship to the university. Initially he rented a room but it was too expensive so he moved into a dorm supported by a Khmer Association. He is now volunteer Vice Director of that Association and gives back to the organization that helped him; he usually stops by a couple of times a week after work to visit with students in the dorm.

“It was great to be in the BSW degree program, while this was my first time to come to Phnom Penh, I quickly made friends with students from other provinces and backgrounds. The class environment was positive, lecturers encouraged us to participate, to discuss ideas, to join in group activities. I was really shy having come from the countryside, I was nervous and completely lacked confidence. With encouragement from my instructors and peers, my confidence began to grow, and I began to participate more actively. I changed a lot over my time in the program. Teachers were so supportive, we could approach them at any time. Even after I graduated, I continued to talk with my instructors about my ideas at work, gather feedback on different options to be an effective social worker.”

Hired upon graduation, Neth worked as a social worker and program coordinator for a new NGO where he had a lot of latitude and independence to develop programs. The programs focused on literacy for children and adults and encouraging children to stay in school. He created annual plans to meet the agency goals, implemented activities,

and developed reports. He was spotlighted on a couple of TV shows sharing his knowledge and promoting positive parenting with the importance of playing with our children and another on how to help your child build their confidence.

“I still run a girls club group on the week-end to encourage girls to not drop out, value education and to grow their leadership skills. Our society still has a tendency to undervalue girls, their education and to send them out early to work rather than be in school. This needs to change.”

In the past, only wealthy individuals could apply to attend the Royal Academy of Cambodia, but this has changed so Neth decided to apply. It is very competitive as graduates earn posts in higher ranking government positions. Neth was accepted and after finishing the two-year program focused on public administration, he was assigned a position within the Ministry of Finance and Economy in their new Social Protection Council – a 1st for social work.

“I want to be a decision maker to change the system. I hope I will use my social work knowledge and skills to impact policy. I know it is hard to change the “system” but I want to try to influence policy, contribute my experiences, what I learned from my background and my degree.”

“My decision was the right one, I made the right choice in picking social work. In my village there are a lot of problems that I witnessed day to day, domestic violence, poverty, people migrating for work and leaving kids behind with relatives. As a social worker and now hopefully a policy maker, I became a person who can help address some of those issues, a person who can work together with those people in need and make change.”

~ BSW graduate

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The first thing that comes to mind when you are talking to **Nida** is her infectious presence. She bubbles with curiosity and has a vibrant smile. These attributes may be part of her strong resilience that mask hardships in her young life. Being the 4th child in her family, she had made it farthest in school than the others, but still by Grade 7 she too dropped out in order to work and help her family survive. By age 18, she had arrived from the provinces to Phnom Penh to begin work in a garment factory.

At the Workers Information Drop-in Center, Nida met a Department of Social Work instructor who saw the resilience and her potential and encouraged her to go back to school. She began taking extra classes in order to prepare for Cambodia's version of a GED. She initially was interested in media communications as a major because she volunteered at a radio station and helped to make videos. However, the department requires students to be under the age of 23 and she was already 24. Again at the workers center, she was encouraged to check out social work so she made an appointment.

"I met teacher Thyroth and others who were so welcoming and encouraging to me when I picked up application for admission. Soon I would become the first in my family to go to university in Social Work."

"Initially I wasn't sure what social work was, it seemed like 3 words meaning society, work or task, and technologies or strategies. I now see social work as being about social justice. Social workers can disseminate information broadly to people, advocate for fairness and equity. It's about helping poor people know their rights and

getting services that they need. Garment worker salaries should be equitable."

"Social work is not politics. Social work works with individuals, groups, communities and supports them to address needs, it examines the root problem, issue, and doesn't solve their problems but supports them to make their own decisions and encourages them to be strong."

"Social work has helped me. I already use what I've learned in class. I have volunteered for the past year to support other workers to learn English. I use the interpersonal communication skills from my IP class, use active listening, show more empathy."



"My mother worries that I won't have a job after graduating with a SW degree. There are lots of unemployed university graduates, but I know I won't be one of them. When I graduate I may work at some place like Ministry of Women's Affairs, maybe at a NGO but the government needs to change, we need to change the system."

~ Current BSW Year 3 student

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Sometimes you have to take a stand. **Sreyneth** had worked for multiple years at the factory and according to Cambodian labor law she was entitled to a solid severance package if the company closed shop and she was laid off. Instead they left in the middle of the night and workers came the next day to find the factory shuttered and locked. They didn't receive their hard earned wages for that month much less the legally required severance. For the next 3 years, Sreyneth joined with others to lead a small group of employees to file complaints, work within the legal arbitration process while also advocating with buyers to get what was theirs. In the end, the factory owners made compensation that was only a portion of what was truly legally owed. Had Sreyneth and others not persisted, the owners, who left in the dark of the night, would never have paid a penny.

"As a worker in a factory, I was there to work hard to earn money. I had to leave school at Grade 5 to start working. I began factory work when I was 17. I have a lot of people who depend on me for financial support. I first came by the Workers Information Drop-In Center (WIC) and began to learn that there is a world beyond earning money at the factory. Through WIC and now through the social work program, I have learned about laws to support equity, labor, laws to address corruption. Sometimes as I learned, laws are not the solution or don't result in a fair solution."

"Many told me I was foolish to spend so much time after work studying. I took catch up classes sometimes 2 hours a day to try to pass the exam (Cambodia's GED). Many said all of this time would not amount to anything. Sometimes it was a struggle to keep moving forward. I struggled a lot with English. Then I was accepted



into RUPP and the social work program and it was like a dream. Many people in my community couldn't believe what I did but now I'm a role model of what they can do. I'm really proud."

"In the program, I've learned a lot about myself. I love working one to one with people, I'd like to help divorced women and widows to help them so they in turn can support their kids. I like to share my own experience so they can see or have hope that they can do more. It's been helpful to get stronger analysis skills. I like asking questions and asking how can we make the situation better."

Sreyneth blends her love of working with individuals and their needs with an understanding from her own experiences that there is power in a group and in organizing individuals. Together they can have greater voice for change and to work against injustice.

~ Current BSW Year 3 student

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From bioengineering to social work.

Malia's, parents encouraged her to study the sciences, which would lead to a 'good' job so she received a scholarship and began at RUPP in bioengineering. Then one day she saw a post on Facebook about social work and a call for admissions applications. She called to learn more and came to the realization that she was more interested in working and supporting children and the elderly. Social work was what she wanted to do. While she waited to enroll in social work during the next academic year, she borrowed Y1 readings and began to explore social work.

"No one in my rural area knows about social work. But I know it's right for me. My family does not support my decision to stop studying engineering."

Being resilient and coping with hardships isn't new to Malia. She is used to getting up at 4am to do housework for her grandparents, whom she stayed with to go to high school, and then getting herself to school 10km away. Even now she works M-F, 6 hours per day after classes selling snacks to support herself.



"I have a poor family, my family is broken. I've seen a lot of problems especially for girls. There are a lot of people with drinking problems, have a family history of drinking. I want to help."

"The Foundation (Y1) courses were so exciting, the teacher along with the materials. We were asked our opinion, what we thought, it was very different from high school. The focus is on the students, our learning. My classmates are cooperative, friendly, we help each other out."

Malia is just starting the second year of the program, but says she knows she made the right decision. She is excited about her direct practice course, as well as learning about policies. She wants to learn more about social policies that can address problems, for example, the role of reducing media that promote alcohol consumption and limiting access, or how labor and immigration policies can make working safer for those seeking employment abroad.

~ Current BSW Year 2 student

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“Since I was young, I grew up in an education system and had family and neighbors who taught me not to be different. By the time I went to university, I felt like society oppressed my identity.”

“At the Department of Social Work, I had a personal transformation.”

“The professors, courses and my classmates created a safe learning environment to be myself. In class, we discussed social work values which comforted me to express my ideas and learn about a strengths based approach, respecting diversity, being non-judgemental, and confidential. I felt for the first time secure to come out with my identity and sexual orientation to my classmates and instructors in the DSW who were a supportive system for my spiritual, emotional, cognitive development and financial relief. I also raised LGBT issues to discuss in class to share this knowledge and perspective with classmates. I feel fortuitous and privileged to study social work and proud to be a trans social worker making a change in Cambodia.”

Upon his BSW graduation, **Virak** was hired as an Advocacy Officer for the Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK), a non-governmental ground breaking organization dedicated to supporting LGBT rights in Cambodia. RoCK works closely with LGBT communities and respective authorities to ensure long-term protection and support of equal rights and acceptance for LGBT people and their families. The organization is a pioneer forging new spaces for dialogue and advocacy among previously hidden and stigmatized communities.

“I got a job right after graduation because the knowledge and skills that I learned fit directly to

the job description. My work is to advocate for equal rights and treatment for minorities especially for LGBT groups. Professionally, I’ve been using many BSW skills organizing communities, developing advocacy work plans, facilitating workshops and meetings with diverse participants. If any NGOS or CSO who wish me to help, I volunteer and am happy to help them.”

“During the program, I struggled financially because my family did not want to support me after I started to express my opinions, etc. I borrowed money from my best friend/classmate. One day I shared about this and the DSW instructor encouraged me to apply for a scholarship. I got a stipend which allowed me to focus on studying and learning. I didn’t need to work part-time to earn money to support myself. I had more time to read, involve in group discussions, join with school activities and complete assignments. Secondly, I didn’t have go school hungry and I could buy materials such as books, pens, bag, and clothes. The scholarship was extremely helpful for my study. I hope in the future other students will get this kind of opportunity for support.”

“Learning about social justice issues, different meanings of social welfare inspires me. I believe everyone deserves protection, respect, and dignity as humans. In the next 10 years, I hope to continue to upgrade my knowledge and skills to work for a governmental body to make a change on the system to fight against injustice.”

Virak will soon be headed to New Zealand on a competitive full scholarship to begin a MA in public policy and continuing his desire to grow his knowledge to impact macro level change.

~ BSW Graduate