

perspectives

...on the Semiahmoo Peninsula

Thai hospice, Cambodian children's centre at focus of South Surrey club

Rotarians 'hooked' on helping overseas

Tracy Holmes
Staff reporter

A pair of international projects in Southeast Asia are continuing to thrive with support from the Rotary Club of South Surrey.

Club member Brian O'Ruairc and Chip Bowness, an honorary member, said they spent nearly three months at the Ban Bang Boon hospice, just north of Bangkok, and the Happy Home Children's Centre, in Battambang, Cambodia, earlier this year, to check on the projects and help guide locals through additional improvements.

And, they're gearing up to return – as they expect to do every year – in February.

"It's not 'fire and forget,'" Bowness said Tuesday of the work, noting the focus has shifted to one of sustained effort. "(We) try to keep giving them more tools to do what they need to do. But you've still got to check on it."

Bowness, who belongs to the Rotary Club of Bangkok South, said he "got hooked" on Cambodia while serving with the army's Royal Canadian Engineers division from 1996-98. There, he was chief adviser to the Cambodian Mine Action Centre in Phnom Penh, and returned "a few times" with the United Nations in the years that followed.

"Very few people can go there and not be affected by it," Bowness said of the country.

He learned of the hospice, which opened in 1996, after joining the Rotary Club of Bangkok South, and introduced O'Ruairc to the facility in 2015, during a trip to Cambodia to look in on Rotary-funded improvements at the children's centre that got underway the year prior.

Over the years since, fundraising locally – including an anonymous \$10,000 donation – has enabled construction of a new hospice, as well as renovations to the children's centre dormitories, construction of a proper kitchen, addition of a water filtration system and more.

When the local club first became involved with the children's centre, it was nothing more than three tin-roof shacks.

O'Ruairc stressed that the Rotarians do not



Tracy Holmes photo

Chip Bowness and Brian O'Ruairc look at a display board of photos from a trip earlier this year to Cambodia, where South Surrey Rotary Club continues to help with improvements to a children's centre in Battambang.

simply swoop in and do what they want.

"Everything that was done, all the local people did it," and with locally sourced materials, he said. "The only thing we brought in was the water filter."

Bowness and O'Ruairc said during their visit earlier this year – O'Ruairc's fourth – they identified structural problems at the children's centre, and envisioned the benefits that an extension to the hospice could have. The latter would provide independent living

space for volunteers interested in giving their time to assist the hospice operator, a senior Thai woman, O'Ruairc said.

It's hoped that both of those tasks can be accomplished on the return visit. Training in such areas as hygiene, English and staff management will also be offered; components Bowness described as "the meat of sustainment."

Last week, the club received \$13,000 from Rotary District 5050 to further those efforts,

but O'Ruairc and Bowness said another US\$40,000 is needed to complete the projects. Recent fundraisers have included a Beatles tribute band at the Crescent Beach Legion and a shred-a-thon. Next up is a sold-out dinner and auction event Nov. 21 at the Washington Avenue Grill.

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