



# Cambodian Calling

Hayley Shields

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A year ago I was married, running a small business and paying off a mortgage in the suburbs of Auckland. If you had told me by Christmas I would be living in a dormitory in Phnom Penh Cambodia with 35 young women, I would have offered to buy you a stiff drink. But that's exactly what happened.

A broken heart is not something we can ever prepare for, and until it happens, we never know how we will respond. For me, I felt like my world had ended when my partner of 11 years called it quits. It was startling how quickly my reality was shattered and everything we built together came tumbling down like a house of cards. In the midst of the chaos of separation, confusion, conflict and house selling, I was thrown a lifeline from my friends in Cambodia. I booked a one-way ticket and jumped ship. It proved to be one of the best decisions I have ever made.

I arrived with a backpack and heavy heart. A shrunken version of the woman I was. How I sold my house, packed up my life and got myself there was nothing short of miracle with the support of some special friends. I knew I had little choice but to give myself the time I needed to recover.

I had lofty intentions to spend some of my time volunteering. I'd checked out a few websites before leaving NZ but decided to wait until I was on the ground and ask around through people I met. In my first week I was in shell shock. It took all my courage to walk to the corner to an air-conditioned café for my daily coffee habit. Reading the local English daily newspaper, I saw an ad for a volunteer position that was written for me. A leadership mentor for future women leaders of Cambodia. Young women from poor rural families, at university in Phnom Penh. Was this divine intervention? Sure felt like it although it filled me with trepidation. Was I ready and capable of this?

The Harpswell Foundation is an American NGO. They provide safe accommodation, food, university scholarships and leadership development to 80 young women from poor rural families in Cambodia. ([www.harpswellfoundation.org](http://www.harpswellfoundation.org)) They have two dormitories in Phnom Penh. Harpswell was founded by Professor Alan Lightman. Alan still teaches at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston, is an accomplished novelist, philanthropist and all round humble and inspirational human being. I knew I had found the right place to be.

For 9 weeks I lived with 35 incredible young women between the ages of 17 and 24. I taught English language and critical thinking skills in seminars discussing current events. Classes were held late in the evening when all the girls were home from a full day at university. On Sunday afternoons I delivered leadership workshops. No lazy weekends for these young women, they are on a mission to change lives. They are so aware of the opportunity they have to transform the lives of their families, their village and their country. Their drive to succeed and the sparkle in their eyes kept me going through my darker days.

Each day began with alarms buzzing at 5.30am. Showering, cleaning and cooking all took place in the early morning before they all left for a full day at university. I woke to pungent smells of breakfast Cambodian style (think fermented fish paste) coming from the kitchen. Sleeping in a bunk bed with an electric fan and only cold water to shower initially seemed like a hardship to me but I soon got past that. I felt humble in the presence of those girls, who grew up in homes without plumbing or refrigeration. It wasn't easy being there. I had moments of deep disorientation, wondering how life could change so much, so quickly. I found sanity during the day in lattes, massages and good food, which are all available for those of us fortunate enough to have cash in our pocket.

In a moment of madness I decided to run the annual half marathon around the temples of Angkor Wat in December. Rising before the sun 5 days per week, I pounded the soiled streets of Phnom Penh before the heat became unbearable. Inspired by charity fundraising back home, I launched a campaign, "Running for the Women of Cambodia", through Facebook and my blog, to raise money for the Harpswell girls. Thanks to the generosity of friends, family and clients I was able to donate US\$1200 towards scholarships, which is enough to fund tuition fees for 4 women for one year.

When I left NZ people said to me through the haze of hurt, that good things will come out of what I was going through. I knew in my heart they were right, but I could not for the life of me think what was possible. Becoming part of the Harpswell family was one of those good things. The young women at Harpswell live as one big family of sisters. Growing up without sisters and not having any children of my own, I found myself embraced by these beautiful young souls. I know that during my short time there I was able to help them, but they'll never know just how being with them, helped to healed me.

I'm on a mission to keep helping those girls and others like them. I'm not sure where this road will take me but I'm being called and I'm listening.



*"We cannot choose the country where we are born. But we can, and should, recognize that we are all part of one human family. When we help women achieve higher education, we are helping not only those individual women. We are helping the entire society. As studies by the World Bank and several other international organizations have shown, educating and empowering women is the single most effective way to help developing countries. Women are not the problem; women are the solution --- to worldwide poverty, to hunger, to lack of health care, to slavery and sex trafficking, to suppression of freedom and dignity. Women have been marginalized in almost every culture in every century of human history. But women are the most powerful force for positive change in the world today."*

#### **Harpswell Foundation**

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Anyone interested in learning more about how to help the young women of Harpswell can contact me through my website [www.energycoach.co.nz](http://www.energycoach.co.nz) Harpswell are always looking for women volunteers for leadership resident positions. I would also be delighted to give public talks on the experience. To donate, go directly to [www.harpswellfoundation.org](http://www.harpswellfoundation.org)

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Hayley Shields is the Director of Energy Coaching based in Auckland. Specialising in generating change through leadership coaching she works with talented and ambitious people throughout NZ and internationally who are ready to wake up, seeking to do the best they can and live a life they love. [www.energycoach.co.nz](http://www.energycoach.co.nz)

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