

Cover story

Snapshot of a charity building new lives

Photographer Deborah Groves has spent the past two years in Cambodia. **Angie Kay** reports on her fight to ease the life of villagers through her charity.

DEBORAH Groves sat down with a magazine recently and read about how some in our western society are now bleaching their eyeballs to match their sparkling whitened teeth.

Surrounded by extreme poverty in the Cambodian home she has lived in since 2005, the Coast photographer was at a loss to reconcile the two realities.

"I couldn't understand it," Deborah, 42, said. "I just couldn't believe it. I rarely get to see a women's magazine and someone had brought a couple over for me to Cambodia. In the past I had always enjoyed reading magazines but I just put that one down and went back to work."

Work for Deborah now focuses on helping to empower her new neighbours in the Prasat Char village in Siem Reap province in the mid north west of Cambodia with her charity Helping Hands Cambodia.

In less than two years she has helped them to build a bridge making the village less isolated which improves work opportunities for the villagers, build a school which gives 300 children a rudimentary education including lessons on speaking English (an essential for finding work in the nearest town) and which features the only toilet in the village, as well as constructing water pumps to provide clean drinking water.

Much of the last 12 months has been focussed on establishing a new eye treatment program which has saved the sight of numerous villag-

ers, a "full bellies" breakfast program for students at the school and the "work for a bicycle" program.

"Every household in the village has now earned a bike," Deborah says brimming with pride. "We don't just give them a bike; they have to work for it. It costs them \$5 and they have to work for Helping Hands for a day doing things in the village. If they can't afford the \$5 they can earn the bike by working for four days.

"The effect of a program like this is not only that they get a bike which they can use to go to work or high school in Siem Reap, but it also enhances their dignity and I am proud of that.

"We are not turning them into beggars. We want to facilitate them helping themselves. We want to help train up the younger people so they can become leaders in their village because they are the hope for the future of the country.

"It would be so easy to just go in there and see a family needs some new clothes and give them to them but that doesn't give them dignity because they then come to feel they have to rely on other people.

"We are only here to facilitate the change but it is the villagers who make it happen."

Bringing about such extraordinary transformation was the last thing Deborah expected when she went on a tour to Cambodia in 2004.

At the time she was running a successful wedding photography business in Currumbundi but "I felt I



BRIGHT FUTURE: This young girl has a future thanks to the Helping Hands charity, which has built the local school.

PHOTOS: DEBORAH GROVES

needed to make some sort of change," she explained.

"I went for a two-week tour saying I could settle back into life as a wedding photographer or I would come back more disgruntled. I came back more disgruntled.

"Everyone thought I was crazy but I kept thinking that I was more than just a business. The poverty impacted me the most and I felt I could do something about it. The way they live was just so primitive."

So Deborah now combines her passion for photography, her driving

need to bring about lasting, positive change and her rather extraordinary people skills to make the difference.

She still takes her photos but now they are of the sights and people of Cambodia and they are sold to tourists in hotel souvenir shops, book shops, galleries and airport galleries with the money going back into her Helping Hands charity which last year became a registered non-government organisation in Cambodia.

"The photos help to raise money but they also help to raise awareness of the issues," Deborah said.

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