

Stories From
Laos
Spring 2020



Sonephet Shares Her Story

Laos is young. Of its 7 million citizens, nearly 60% of this thickly forested and mountainous Southeast Asian country is under the age of 25.

Even with recent decades' government investment in and reform of the education system, young people here still don't enjoy the education and possibilities that young people in North America have. More than a third of adolescent women here are married before age 18 and less than half attend secondary school.

But they still have dreams. Sonephet Laoma dreamed of making her parents proud and helping other Lao nationals. The World Renew team in Phongsaly, the northernmost province in Laos, has had a front row seat to her efforts to make her dreams a reality.

When Sonephet had the opportunity to study in Mai district high school, she volunteered with the World Renew project for three years. During that time, she learned English and computer skills while gaining work experience related to development. As she researched her own language and culture with our team, she helped develop reading materials using traditional stories.

Sonephet even starred in a video drama to promote education in which she portrayed a girl from the village who went to town to study high school and then college, after which she returned to work with a community development project.

But as she played her role, Sonephet was still dreaming for herself. "I dreamed about being able to continue my studies after high school," she says. "I thought it was not possible, since my mother was on drugs. However, the project offered a scholarship to me and three others from this area to study nursing."

Sonephet tackled that challenge with the same drive she brought to high school and her work at World Renew. "Although it was difficult," she says, "I did my best and have now graduated."

Not only that, but Sonephet has returned to intern with the World Renew Phongsaly project. "My dream has come true!" she says with a smile, "I will use what I've learned to help improve the health in the project villages and beyond."

At 22 years old, Sonephet celebrates her achievements and those who helped her get there. She's a standard

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bearer in this young country and especially in this town of 6,000 on the slopes of Mount Phu Fa.

“My parents are proud of me,” she grins, “and some of the young people have said that they hope they can do what I’ve done.”

Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart,
and wait for the LORD.

Psalm 27:14



What’s that for?

Take a close look at this photo.

What could this item be used for?

Don’t hesitate or be shy, but send your best guess to Mike at fivem-family@gmail.com.

The mystery will be revealed in the next newsletter!



Mystery Revealed

Your guesses were:

- A device for doing laundry
- For irrigating a vegetable garden or rice field
- Water pressure for drip irrigation or water storage
- A device to generate electricity



And the correct answer is: a water powered rice mill. The water is pulled through the bamboo pipe by gravity where it fills the secondary bamboo trough, which tips when it is full. As the water in the trough drains out, the trough pops up again to be refilled. The other end of this secondary trough is inside the building and works like a pile driver with a pounding action to mill rice.

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World Renew Laos Update:

- Matthew's basketball team worked well together this year and managed to take first place in the Vientiane Schools Sports Association. Unfortunately, the regional basketball competition planned for February was canceled because of the coronavirus.
- Monica enjoyed this semester at Uganda Christian University, experiencing many opportunities for growth and reflection, including two weeks "off the grid" in a remote area.
- Maria celebrated success on her exams, as well as her acceptance into an off-campus missional home newly established by a church family in the area.
- At the end of January, Moe Moe, Mike, and Matthew participated in a Sunday Fellowship youth group retreat at an eco lodge nearly two hours away from Vientiane.



- In February, Moe Moe, Mike, and Matthew had another adventure, participating in a triathlon organized by the school. Moe Moe then further tested her long distance endurance by completing the 10 km run at the Annual Vientiane Marathon. Although it had been officially canceled the night before, Moe Moe and many other determined runners ran anyway!
- In February, Matthew presented a personal project for school that he and his classmates have been working on since last August. Matthew's project focused on behavior change and how to develop healthy lifestyle habits and included practical application for him. Matthew did a lot of research, interviews, writing, exercise, and wrapped it all up with a video.
- In early January, the team here reviewed our visits to four new potential target districts and decided to focus on the Phonhong District of Luang Prabang Province.
- In February, the team from Xieng Khouang then traveled to Phonhong for meetings with the district and a need assessment process that included collecting information in 34 villages to help us better understand where we can best begin our work.

- On February 20, in a meeting with district officials, we mutually agreed on 16 villages to be targeted by the new project. Now we begin reviewing the information collected in those communities in order to draft a project plan that fits with the needs and interests identified. We hope to present that plan to officials in Phonhong district at the beginning of April and, once approved at the district level, seek approval at the province and ministry levels.
- Project staff who are currently working with us in Xieng Khouang will soon need to decide if they are able to move to the new project area in order to continue working with us.



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