Kay Eva - Saving lives in Cambodia
by Inspired.org

In Kay’s words...

Who/what inspires me: I have always been inspired by people who can leave their home country and show love, kindness and mercy to the people who live in desperate poverty and hardship. In Cambodia, that would be someone like Marie Ens from Canada who leads ‘Rescue’ – a home for hundreds of orphan children, AIDS families and grannies. And in Mozambique, Heidi Baker from ‘Iris Global’ children’s homes is a pure example of transforming love into something concrete.

Kay Eva was travelling through rural Cambodia on the day she realised her life calling. She was with a group handing out supplies to those in need when they approached a devastatingly poor family living under sheets of tin. Grubby children played in the dirt, the air hung heavy with humidity and traffic roared down the nearby road.

They were here to deliver powdered milk for the family’s new baby. But the baby was missing. It had been sold the day before for $20 – a desperate act to raise money to feed the rest of the family. The news hit Kay like a punch to the stomach. Horrified, this mother of three knew she had to act. “That really shook me up,” she recalls. “I thought I’ve got to do something. I can’t just stand back and say ‘how horrible’.”

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Fast forward 11 years and Kay has launched a thriving charity, Stitches of Hope, which operates a sewing centre to train women and help them find work, a children’s home for under-privileged kids, a community centre and a school. The charity has sunk wells, built houses, sponsored families of AIDS victims, funded cancer treatments and aided grandparents looking after their grandchildren.
But how did Kay – a once humble mother of three who battled sexual abuse as a child and cancer as an adult – go from an everyday housewife living on the outskirts of Perth Western Australia to someone who is quite literally saving lives in a developing country?

Cambodia’s desperately poor live in homes such as this one.

Burning desire to help

Home in Australia after the first Cambodian trip, Kay couldn’t rid her head of the image of the mother who had sold her baby. They’d been told the baby would go to someone unable to have children of their own. But there were also whispers of babies and young children sold for sex trafficking. If the traffickers got kids early, there’d be little chance of escape. Kay’s horror at a mother being in such a position was almost beyond comprehension.

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But what could Kay do? She wasn’t a nurse, a doctor, even a teacher. How could she possibly help? “I felt inadequate,” she says. “I carried this insecurity that I wouldn’t be able to do anything for anybody.”

Kay shared her feelings of inadequacy with a friend who worked in Cambodian prisons organising activities and providing basic supplies for prisoners. The friend asked: “Well what can you do?” “My only training is a commercial dress makers’ certificate,” Kay replied. “Well that’s exactly what they need – teach them sewing,” her friend responded.

A charity is born

Kay enlisted the help of family and friends to raise $600 and journeyed back to Cambodia. Her friend had organised sewing classes for women in a village gripped by poverty, at a women’s prison and at a children’s home with teenage girls.

A nervous Kay ventured in with hand-sewing kits and an interpreter. She taught them how to thread needles, to sew in a straight line. Interest soared. Kay bought several sewing machines and soon her students were cutting patterns and making children’s clothes.

The most promising students were given their own sewing machines to take home and start their own business. “They were wildly excited and started coming from miles around to learn how to sew,” Kay says. “We trained 24 women from the village on that trip and more than half of them went on to get work in a factory.”

Kay was exhilarated by the program’s success. “It wasn’t even about helping with basics
like education and health,” Kay says. “Basically, [getting some income] meant they didn’t have to sell their children into sex trafficking, or [to be] cleaners for the wealthy. And in the prison it enabled women to obtain the skills to get a job when they were released so they didn’t have to go back to a life of crime.”

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Depths of poverty
In the meantime, Kay came to better know her new interpreter Chanthy and Chanthy’s husband Narith. The duo showed Kay the depths of poverty experienced in their home village. So they started sewing classes here too and taught English. But Kay realised the problems went much deeper. Soon she was fundraising to install toilets, water filters and wells.

Every time she went home she and her friends would conduct shed parties, movie nights, garage sales to raise money. The funds started rolling in. Kay is continually humbled by the generosity of donors. As momentum grew Kay registered Stitches of Hope as a charity and formed a board of directors.

Together with Chanthy and Narith she founded the Stitches of Hope Sewing Centre – a permanent institution that teaches women to sew, accommodates and feeds them, pays them a wage to fulfill factory orders, and encourages them to set up their own sewing businesses.

Stitches of Hope Sewing Centre

Homing under-privileged children

The more time Kay spent in Cambodia, the more she realised just how far poverty’s tentacles stretched. Everywhere there were heart-wrenching tales of desperately needy children - innocent little beings whose parents had died, or had to leave them to search for work. So, in 2008, Stitches of Hope launched a children’s home which today houses 24 children cared for by live-in Cambodian couples.

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Kay remembers one toddler whose parents were leaving the country to seek work and had sold him for cash to fund their journey. However, fortune tellers warned the buyers that the boy was bad luck so they returned him to his grandparents. Unable to care for him herself, the grandmother brought the then two-year-old to the Stitches of Hope
Children’s Home and handed him over. “It took quite a while to put a smile on his little face,” Kay says. “They’ve all got sad stories to tell, but now live in a place of love and security.”

School-aged children at the children’s home attend a nearby school and the older kids can go to university or, if they’d prefer, to learn at the Stitches of Hope Sewing Centre.

Children’s Home residents.

HIV village
It was through her work at the children’s home that Kay realised how badly HIV AIDS was affecting some communities. Some of the children in the home had been left without a carer after one or both of their parents had died of AIDS.

One village was particularly devastated by the condition. “It’s in a very poor area of Cambodia where the men go to the capital city of Phnom Penh to work, and sleep around, then bring HIV back to their wives,” Kay says. “There are predominantly women and children in the village because many of the men have died. It’s a very sad place. The women are very downtrodden, but we are restoring their trust and giving them a hope and a vision for an improved future.”

Some of the kids in the children’s home are taken back to villages like this one to care for their surviving parents when HIV overcomes them – their chances of a school and university education often gone when they leave Stitches of Hope.

Kay learned that many HIV sufferers were foregoing their treatment because taking a day off work to receive medical help meant they were docked a week’s pay. So she organised sponsors to pay for these victims to access their treatment. Stitches of Hope also installed fish ponds, rice paddies and vegetable plots in the village to help residents feed themselves. They built five houses, dug a well and established a meeting hall. Five more houses are in the planning.

Women in a village left destitute by HIV greet Stitches of Hope staff.

Overcoming the poverty cycle
More and more Kay came to question the ongoing poverty cycle. She says those entrenched in poverty are too busy surviving the day to ponder how to escape its cruel clutches. “But I believe we need to get them to think outside their own needs, to think as a community, to think beyond today and plan for the future,” she says.

With this in mind, Kay, Chanthy and Stitches of Hope launched a community centre and school which now teaches more than 80 children. “It’s working exceptionally well,” Kay says. “It has brick walls, desks, lighting, fans and school equipment. It’s such a delight to see them so keen to learn.”

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The charity’s new in-country director is particularly passionate about empowering and educating the rural children and families who often miss the opportunity to be supported. “Our Cambodian staff are committed to improving the lives of the people we work with and we keep in regular touch with all that is happening,” Kay says.

New hope for cancer patients
Through their work in the children’s home and the villages it became increasingly obvious to Stitches of Hope staff that it was grandparents who often faced the burden of caring for children, because the parents had left to find work. So again the charity stepped in, this time sponsoring individual families from one village.

Kay got to know the people here and met one lady who had an external tumour on her breast that was size of a saucer. The woman had wrapped the tumour in plastic and tied it up with a piece of string to avoid offending the westerners with the smell. She had visited the doctor about it but he took one look, knew she couldn’t pay for treatment and dismissed her.

Cancer patient on the road to recovery.

Another lady Kay met, a mother of four, had experienced a similar situation. She’d been told, “if you can’t afford treatment there is none.” Kay, who’d battled ovarian and bowel cancer herself, was outraged. She organised Stitches of Hope funding to pay for their treatment.

She visited the women as they suffered through chemotherapy, assuring them their hair loss and fatigue was normal. “I was just able to lie with them and hold their hand, encourage them and tell them I’d been through cancer treatment so I understood what
they were going through.”

Both women finished their treatment and survived their cancer.

Changing lives
When Kay looks back on what Stitches of Hope has achieved she feels immense satisfaction – especially about the children’s home and school. She says there are so many stories of individual lives changed. The journey of a woman aged about 22 springs to mind.

The woman had a tumour on her lip and approached Kay begging for help. She’d never get a job, she’d never get married, she sobbed. The disfigurement had made her an outcast.

Stitches of Hope paid for the woman’s treatment and, the next time Kay saw her, she skipped up to Kay to kiss her. All smiles and gratitude the woman gushed that she’d never before been able to kiss people. The next time Kay visited the young woman was no longer there – because she’d finally got the job she’d never before dreamed possible.

Teenagers at the Stitches of Hope Children’s Home