



"No one teaches us to dream,
we just do."

Br Tony Burrows with the five students who have finished their university courses

STUDENTS LIVING WITH A DISABILITY OVERCOME BARRIERS

There are an estimated 86,000+ children and young people under the age of 20 living with a physical disability in Cambodia. Those with a disability are less likely to attend school and more likely to drop out than their non-disabled peers due to inadequate services. Only 10% of schools in the country have ramps and seated toilets, the long distance needed to travel from home to school provides additional challenges for young people with a disability; teachers are not trained or equipped to cater for these students and these young people often face deep stigma and discrimination that focuses on their limitations rather than their abilities and talents.

Br Tony Burrows, Executive Director of Marist Solidarity Cambodia says, "No one teaches us to dream, we just do. But for young people living in remote rural areas, especially those with disabilities who have no access to education, the dreams will not carry them far."

For Cambodian children and young people with disabilities who become part of the LaValla Project, their dreams do become a reality. The dream to be accepted, to be treated with dignity, to have fun and enjoy life, to access an education, to be able to walk, to have skills for employment and more – all these different dreams have become a reality for students at LaValla.

On Tuesday, August 2, these dreams were realised by five students who finished their University courses, passing their final exams. Some of these students have been at LaValla since they started in Grade 1, fourteen years ago. They undertook courses which included Law, Public Administration, English Literature and Business Studies. Three have already gone on to employment within their field of study.

One of the students, who is now a teacher at a private school in Phnom Penh, spoke about the discrimination and ridicule he received at his school back in his village prior to joining the LaValla School. He spoke about being told that he would never amount to anything and that he should stay home and stop wasting the teachers' time. Thankfully, his father persisted, and he was referred to Marist Solidarity Cambodia who have supported him through to finishing university.

Br Tony stated, "Since our students come from the poorest of families in the country, a project like ours depends totally on the generosity of others – funding agencies and individuals. We are sincerely thankful for their generosity and belief in these young people whose lives have benefited so much from their support."