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NOTICES Reap restaurant providing safe haven, skills to young adults

Hong Raksmeay | Publication date 03 August 2022 | 19:38 ICT

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Youths enrolled in HAVEN's hospitality training programme practise their service skills. SUPPLIED

Surrounded by greenery in Siem Reap, the first impression one gets of HAVEN – a restaurant that serves as a job skills training centre for disadvantaged young adults – is a welcoming one.

Patrons arriving there will immediately encounter a smiling hostess performing a respectful sampeah, Cambodia's traditional gesture of greeting similar in appearance to that of a Christian prayer.

This small social enterprise with a mission to impart life skills and job training to young adults is run by a Swiss couple, but the customs it follows are distinctly Khmer while also providing a quality of service that meets international standards and expectations.

HAVEN takes in young adults from impoverished backgrounds and trains them in food service, teaches them important life skills, provides them with safe housing and medical care and gives them the confidence to build an independent life where they can provide for themselves and their future families.

“Set up in a fully functioning restaurant, HAVEN offers one training program for cooks and one training program for waiters and waitresses,” said Sara Wallimann, co-founder and managing partner of HAVEN.

The training programme is based on the Swiss apprenticeship system, a dual model that combines on-the-job practical training and additional lessons in the classroom.

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that combines on-the-job practical training and additional lessons in the classroom.

She says the HAVEN trainees learn everything they need and get enough experience to be fully employable and step right into employment after they graduate. Additional aspects of the training include life skills workshops, computer classes and English lessons.

“At the end of the training year we offer special CV and job interview lessons and workshops, plus advice on how to settle into a new work place,” said Sara. “We support each graduate in finding a job placement and 100 per cent of our trainees find work after completing the full training programme.”

HAVEN came about after Sara and Paul Wallimann visited Cambodia and stayed for 7 months during a trip around the world back in 2008.

“Back then we saw a lot of organisations for children, but realised there were not many options for these kids once they aged-out of those programmes and left them as young adults,” said Sara.

The couple started thinking about opportunities they could create that could bridge that gap by teaching young people how to take care of themselves on their own.

In their home country of Switzerland the dual-system with vocational training is a fundamental part of the education system and the couple realised that they didn’t have to invent anything new and could just use the Swiss system they were already familiar with.

“We decided to take this well-known and established concept and adapt it to Cambodia and the local needs,” Sara said.

Hence the idea for the HAVEN training restaurant was born – a place where young people could train in the hospitality sector and prepare for employment and an independent future.

From 2008 to 2010, the couple travelled to various places around the world, spending seven months in Cambodia. In 2010 they returned to Switzerland and developed the HAVEN concept.

They went back to work, saved money and founded the non-profit Dragonfly Association to create awareness about Cambodia’s need for international assistance and began raising funds for HAVEN, according to Sara.

Then in early 2011 they moved to Cambodia and built the first HAVEN restaurant from scratch and opened that same year with their first class of trainees enrolled.

Paul, 54, worked as the head of a food microbiology department at a test laboratory and specialises in hygiene consulting and training in the food and pharmaceutical industries as well as being an expert in microbiological examinations and troubleshooting quality and food safety issues for the hotel and catering industry.

Sara, 45, has always had a passion for communicating and making connections with others and she spent most of her working life with agencies planning large-scale corporate events or publicity campaigns for her clients in public relations.

Just prior to leaving on their world trip, Paul was working as a teacher and independent consultant and Sara was head of marketing for a popular vegetarian restaurant group.

Wallimann told The Post that the training programme is open to both young women and young men aged 18 or older who were previously involved with other organisations providing assistance who refer them to HAVEN, such as shelters, community care programmes or outreach programmes, and also through social workers from all around Cambodia, and because HAVEN offers safe and secure housing free of charge, it doesn’t matter how far away the trainees come from

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...looking for a change, it doesn't matter how far away the chances come from.

"We usually have two types of young adults come to us. Most of them are school drop-outs who are in a state of limbo. Without a support system they often have to accept hard and dangerous jobs to support themselves and their families," said Sara.

These are the kids who they focuses on the most by providing them with high quality hospitality skills that make them employable throughout Cambodia and then help them find jobs where they can build a career and plan for their futures.

The second type of young adults who come to HAVEN are those who could realistically finish high school and who do want to study, but because they come from poor backgrounds there is no financial means available to them to do so and so they apprentice with HAVEN and find good work with the goal of earning enough to continue with their studies, according to Sara.

For example, Met Sokhhoern was trained as a cook from 2016 to 2017. After graduation he got an internship at Amansara and was then hired full-time. He is still working there today.

"When I finished high school, I looked for a job and I earned some money for university fees, but it just wasn't enough. So I decided to apply to HAVEN. While there, I was not only trained in cooking skills, but I also had free meals and accommodations plus a monthly wage with incentives and a year-end bonus," said Sokhhoern, who is originally from Chi Kraeng district in the province.

With many restaurants closed temporarily or permanently due to the pandemic, Sokhhoern used that time to finish a one-year English language training course, which is often required by many international hotels for certain staff members. Now he plans to pursue his studies in the field of business or hospitality management soon.

Before Covid-19, HAVEN would employ around 16 trainees each year. During Covid-19 they could only employ eight trainees due to the downturn in business. Now, the organisation is in the middle of the application process for the new training class and it plans to accept up to 12 trainees with the hope that business will begin rebounding soon.

"We set a high value on offering a protective and safe family-style environment. And thanks to our size we are able to adapt the training to each students' needs and pace, so we're never leaving anyone behind.

"During the pandemic, we kept coming up with new ideas on how to keep everyone busy. And we stayed open as much as possible, keeping our team on board. We continued to pay their salaries and take care of everyone. We were determined to get through Covid-19 together," Sara said.

One aspect of HAVEN's training that could carry on even without customers in the restaurant is their life skills lessons, which Sara said are valuable because they are applicable to work life as well as daily life and they can have an impact that goes well beyond what they do on the job.

"For life skills we often work with NGO's who specialise in certain areas and they offer these trainings within our programme while in return we can financially support them for their work. Life skills training covers topics like critical and creative thinking, decision making, conflict management, time management, environmental and sustainability issues, gender roles like equity and equality, safety on the internet, women's health, women's rights, money management and so on," explained Sara.

As a challenge for new training years starts until they get certificates, guests are really great and supportive. But not everyone who comes knows HAVEN is a training restaurant.

Working at HAVEN can be challenging for new trainees but the guests are usually very supportive, though not everyone who eats there is aware that it is a training restaurant.

“Since we opened almost 11 years ago, we have always put a high value on quality and providing a great dining experience for our guests because we don’t want to be seen as a charity and have people let us get away with giving them mediocre food and bad service,” Sara told The Post.

With the training year 2021-22 coming to an end, HAVEN is very happy to announce that each trainee has an internship placement at a highly respected hotel that will offer them valuable opportunities to transition into future jobs.

HAVEN will close down temporarily from August 27 to September 13 in order to begin working with a new class of trainees, but they expect to resume service again immediately thereafter.

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Historic Battambang town bans billboards

The Battambang town administration informed all house and business owners in Svay Por commune to remove all billboards by August 1 as it is preparing to submit the town to UNESCO for inclusion on its historical cultural heritage list. Its July 25 notice said all signage was



All foreigners' accommodations to be inspected: Sar Kheng

The Ministry of Interior is undertaking a serious effort to inspect all the accommodations of foreigners in Cambodia – except diplomats – in order to find and identify human traffickers. Minister Sar Kheng said this

would include inspections on the homes of foreigners employed by businesses, private



Ice cream, noodles flagged over carcinogen

The General Department of Customs and Excise of Cambodia (GDCE) has identified three types of instant noodles and ice cream trademarks originating from Thailand, Vietnam and France that are suspected to contain ethylene oxide, which poses a cancer risk to consumers. The general department has



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Khmer influence growing in Hollywood

The rare success of The Cleaning Lady – an American TV series which stars Cambodian-French Hollywood actress Elodie Yung – sheds some light on Asian immigrants to the US, yet a significant representation

gap of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) exists both on screen and behind



Rise in Thai air routes to Siem Reap fuels travel hopes

Local tourism industry players are eager for regional airline Bangkok Airways Pcl's resumption of direct flight services between the Thai capital and Siem Reap town on August 1 – home of Cambodia's awe-inspiring Angkor Archaeological Park – which is expected to boost the growth rate of



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