

# Where once there were mines

*A Cambodian village has been transformed by the efforts of the Powell River community, led by the Powell River United Church*

JOYCE CARLSON  
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Terra Mack did not recognize the Cambodian village of O'Chrey when she travelled there in April. It bore no resemblance to the place she had visited in 2001.

Mine markers have disappeared from the fields.

Other villages and pagodas have sprung up along the way. Rows and rows of perfect lines of green plants stretch vertically towards the horizon. Every little section of land that could be planted was planted, including a roadway that is not yet finished.

"It was quite an eye-opener," she says.

Four years ago, Mack visited her mother Kathie in Powell River after returning from travelling in Africa. When people in the Powell River United Church congregation heard her next trip would be to Cambodia, they asked her to help with the Adopt-A-Minefield project.

Mack spent two months in Powell River, doing research, making connections with United Nations and Cambodian groups and finding out more about the local group's intentions and aspirations for the project. She then headed for Asia, returning briefly to Powell River to explain what she

had learned, to hand over her documentation and take part in the project's very first fundraiser, the sale of corn on the cob at the Blackberry Street Party in August 2001.

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*We no longer live in fear.*

**O'CHREY VILLAGE CHIEF**

Mack told of a village where the residents were only able to plant a few crops and children were in danger when they played outside. There was no school and little economic activity. The only place the villagers could sell their crops was in Thailand, and they were offered low prices because there was no alternative market.

When Mack first arrived in O'Chrey, it was after an all-day trip on horrendous roads. Her most recent trip took three hours.

On this year's visit, Mack found the village chief, who was featured in a series of articles in *The Powell River Peak*. And she met with family members of some of the

others she had photographed during her first visit.

"My timing was not very good because I arrived during New Year's festival, and for five days, everyone was off visiting family," she says.

Mack brought lots of her photographs to give to villagers who were in them. She also had copies of articles that had appeared in *The Peak*, and the villagers were excited to see themselves. The chief now holds the pages in trust, as he does all important papers related to village life. He hopes some day the children in school will be able to read them.

A young boy husking corn who appeared on the front page of *The Peak* on November 27, 2002 was intrigued that corn was sold in Powell River as one of the first fundraisers. That issue of *The Peak* was the first in a series of articles describing the villagers and their experiences. A little girl who wanted so much to learn now attends school. Unfortunately, Mack found a man who had lost part of his leg to a landmine had died of malaria.

O'Chrey has not had another landmine accident since Mack was first there.

Crop plantings have diversified. In addition to corn, the villagers now plant peanuts, beans, sesame and potatoes. Two crops a year provide more income to residents. Because of new safe road access to a nearby Cambodian area, they can sell their produce where they get the best prices. "Before they were being exploited and getting terrible prices for their corn," says Mack.

"The economic well-being of the village as well as its population has increased. It's quite amazing to see the difference that the people of



TERRA MACK PHOTO

**CLEAR FIELDS:** Instead of dodging landmines, people of O'Chrey village in Cambodia now harvest crops, like these bean plants, around the village. With the soil and climate, they are able to plant twice a year.

Powell River, led by the United Church, have made in the lives of a village so far away."

A total of 192 families, comprised of 739 people, now live in the village.

When Mack was first in O'Chrey, there was one bamboo platform serving as a shop. Now there are more than 20 shops. There is still no electricity or running water, but there are 20 cell phones. "An important use is for emergencies," says Mack. Some 30 families have black-and-white televisions. "You see the antennas on the roofs of their homes. Some people may not view that as a sign of progress, but it is an important source of information." An additional well has been added, so there are now

three to provide water.

Most important, Mack explains, was a new school that has only been open for four years. There are more than 200 students in four grades from one to four, and four teachers.

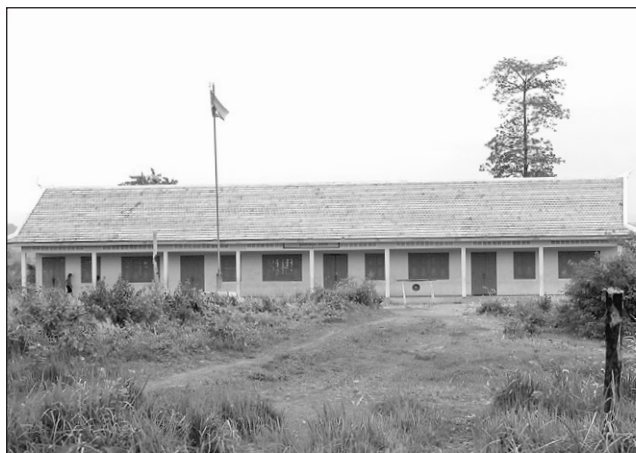
"Part of what's most remarkable is not just the physical change but the fact that this is the last part of the country to come to peace in 1998," Mack explains. "Less than 10 years ago, the men there were soldiers in the jungle, Khmer Rouge, shooting people. They could not go back to their own villages; all the land had already been claimed. They had no option but to set up in the midst of minefields. They have really made an effort to start over again. They are

going to the pagodas with their families, raising their kids, planting crops. It's an amazing indication of political and social change."

Mack will spend the next 12 months in England, studying for her masters degree at the London School of Economics. She hopes to find employment with the United Nations in the future and to continue in her desire to help people in developing areas.

"I will always remember the words of the village chief," says Mack. "He said the biggest benefit from the landmines' removal is 'We no longer live in fear.'"

"Powell River deserves thanks for that because it's a community concerned about the world beyond its own town limits."



TERRA MACK PHOTOS

**A PLACE TO LEARN:** Children of O'Chrey now have a school where there was none before. Currently about 200 students are enrolled in grades one through four, and the school employs four teachers.