

NEWS

Caring for Cambodia by walking in April

BY HELEN GREGORY

SALLY Hetherington OAM has started walking the 7252 kilometres from Sydney to Siem Reap in Cambodia - and she is looking for people to join her.

The University of Newcastle alumna has received 130 registrations from people who have agreed to take 10,000 steps each day in April to raise funds for the Human and Hope Association (HHA Cambodia). It's a locally-run community centre with programs that address the root causes of poverty and empower families to thrive.

Ms Hetherington, 35, said Walk to Cambodia participants aimed to reach more than 9.5 million steps and raise more than \$20,000. "Last year we walked the distance from Australia to Cambodia and halfway back again," she said. "I'm confident [this year] we can walk to Cambodia and all the way back again."

Ms Hetherington said she went to Cambodia in 2007 to spend a month as a "voluntourist" and returned the following year as a volunteer coordinator managing voluntourists. "It was when I was there working at a school for disadvantaged children that I saw so many issues and I realised I was part of the problem," she said. "It was essentially people going over with no experience relevant to the job and saying that they could do it better than the Cambodians. What I learned was the Cambodians are the subject matter experts, they know the community and the culture best and they are there for the



GLOBAL CITIZENS: Sally Hetherington, pictured in Cambodia. "We're global citizens and if we expect to be able to travel to these other countries, we need to be able to help them in their times of need, just like when the bushfires happened last year, a lot of countries donated to our people here."

long term. That's why I was like 'Well I can either call it a day, go back to Australia, be like well I've left the country with a negative footprint or I can actually make a change'."

She joined forces with Cambodians who had started a nightly English school to set up and develop HHA Cambodia into a registered, reputable not-for-profit organisation. "My conditions were - and it took time to get people on board with this idea because Cambodians had also been sold the message that foreign volunteers were the bee's knees - so the conditions were no foreign volunteers anymore and I had to make myself redundant, so we were always

working towards that goal."

Its staff glean knowledge "in country" from other Cambodians and have set up programs to help entire families out of poverty - including vocational training for women who weren't able to finish school that spans sewing, life skills, chemical free farming and business skills - as well as community workshops. HHA Cambodia became entirely locally-run in 2016. "The proudest achievement of my life is being able to step back, but also my self control to step back, because as human beings we want to be needed," she said. "I remember the last day I worked there I bawled my eyes out, 'I'm not needed',

but that's a good thing and we should be celebrating that fact." Ms Hetherington is now the chief executive and only paid employee of Human and Hope Australia, which fundraises for HHA Cambodia to do its work and advocates for the reduction of voluntourism. She said HHA Cambodia and HHA Australia wanted to see the community become self-sustaining and for both their roles to end by 2029.

She said instead of being a voluntourist, people who wanted to help could be an ethical traveller; shop, stay and dine at social enterprises; and support reputable charities with supplies and donations. "But make sure

they are charities that have child protection policies, that won't just let you come in and take photos of kids, all of those are very red flags," she said. "The biggest problem is you're sending the wrong message, you're going in there with that white saviour approach thinking you know better and that your hands-on help is actually needed, when in most situations it is not needed. We really need to change that narrative.... maybe question what your intentions are, because good intentions are not good enough. Think why do you think you need to be there doing hands-on help and if you really do want to help hands-on, find if there's

an Australian charity that raises funds to send to these organisations. We have to stop putting ourselves at the front of this story."

Ms Hetherington started the Walk to Cambodia in 2019. "People experience charity fatigue, for a lot of people they just feel like they're giving and giving and not getting anything out of it," she said. "The great thing about the Walk to Cambodia is that yes you are raising funds for a charity, but also you're improving your fitness at the same time and you're part of a community." Participants can reach 10,000 steps a day in their own way or join an in-person community walk.