



Br Tony Burrows, Executive Director, Marist Solidarity Cambodia with the graduating students



Students from LaValla School

**For immediate release
MEDIA RELEASE**

STUDENTS LIVING WITH A DISABILITY OVERCOME BARRIERS IN CAMBODIA THANKS TO GENEROUS AUSTRALIANS

Social isolation is the greatest impediment for young people living with disabilities to reach their brightest potential. 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.

LaValla School, located in Kandal Province, is a government approved school providing a full primary education to young people with a physical disability in Cambodia. Australian Marist Solidarity CEO, Rebecca Bromhead notes, "Lavalla is a place of joy and hope, nurturing great minds and characters by focusing on what these young people can do rather than their limitations. AMS is privileged to partner with the Lavalla School and help Australians learn more about and support their inspiring work." In 1998, Australian Marist Brothers established the LaValla School to respond to the needs of some of Cambodia's most vulnerable young citizens. As there is little opportunity for these children and young people to receive an education, LaValla School provides tuition, accommodation, and healthcare to the students while they complete their studies.

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.

At LaValla school, students not only receive a comprehensive and quality education, but they also have access to health services they would never have at home and the opportunity to live in an environment in which they develop their many talents and social skills. An environment where they are all equal, where abilities are more important than disabilities, where for the first time in their lives they are not defined by their disabilities.

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."

To support Australian Marist Solidarity and LaValla visit www.australianmaristsolidarity.org.au

About Australian Marist Solidarity in Cambodia

The Marist Brothers have worked in Cambodia since 1995 when two brothers from the Province of Sydney were appointed to Phnom Penh. In 1998, the brothers established an elementary school for children with physical disabilities. They have also since established projects that deliver healthcare services, skills training, development and education to disadvantaged young Cambodians. In 2010, Marist Solidarity Cambodia (MSC) was formed as a non-government organization to promote empowerment and advocacy for disabled children and youth in Cambodia.

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