



Mark Dennis SC

A Reasonable Cause

Elizabeth Nicholson speaks with Mark Dennis SC, barrister at Forbes Chambers who is the founder and convenor of *Reasonable Cause* CPD conferences and registered charity *Reasonable Cause Inc.*



Elizabeth Nicholson (EN): *How did you first become involved with working with disadvantaged youth in Cambodia?*

Mark Dennis (MD): I travelled to Cambodia in 2006 for a holiday. I hadn't really been a philanthropist up until then, but I was at a point in my life where I felt it was time to start. Then, coincidentally, shortly after I got back, I was briefed to appear in sentence proceedings for a Cambodian man, Sothear Choun, who had flown to Australia with about 150 grams of heroin in balloon pellets in his stomach in exchange

for \$40,000.¹ Mr Choun was a rice farmer in remote Cambodia – he earned \$300 cash USD per year plus rice and the family lived in a tiny wooden hut without electricity. His living conditions in gaol in Australia were substantially better than his living conditions at home in Cambodia. While Mr Choun was in custody in Australia, he was able to earn \$60 per week to send back to his family at home – it was a huge sum of money for him. After he was sentenced, he actually refused to sign his parole papers. He served the entire term of his sentence so that he could continue earning \$60 per week and

remit it home – pretty stunning. That had a powerful impact on me. I began sponsoring some kids living in an out of home care facility in Phnom Penh, which was about \$100 per month.

EN: *Your fundraising work began in 2011 with the yearly 'Reasonable Cause CPD', a one-day Continuing Professional Development conference for criminal lawyers which donated all profits to programs for disadvantaged youth in Cambodia. Can you tell me what inspired you to establish that event?*

MD: In 2010, I was asked to become a fundraiser for the out of home care facility in Phnom Penh. There were only two ways I knew how to make money – charging a fee for my professional skills; or speaking at conferences that lawyers paid a fee to attend. So, I thought – I'll do that. We had the first conference in September 2011 and raised \$14,283, and the most recent annual conference (March 2022) raised over \$80,000.

EN: *How you were able to use the funds that you raised?*

MD: Initially, I donated the funds Reasonable Cause CPD raised to the out of home care facility in Phnom Penh that I'd been donating to since 2007. Then, in 2017, we began using some of the funds to offer university scholarships to assist

disadvantaged young adult Cambodians to pursue their career goals and break the cycle of poverty.

EN: *In 2021, you founded Reasonable Cause Inc as a charity – what led to your decision to start your own charity rather than continue donating funds to other projects?*

MD: I had realised that sending the funds to the out of home care facility in Phnom Penh did not necessarily represent best value for the dollars spent. From 2018 until 2020 I served as the Chairperson of the foundation that ran the facility, and over that time I became concerned about the governance and finances of the foundation. I knew that I could do a better job of delivering value for the dollars I was fundraising. So, I incorporated Reasonable Cause Inc. We operate by delivering joint projects with partner organisations that we select very carefully. In simple terms, Reasonable Cause Inc is a bit like a funnel and a filter – we do a lot of due diligence to ensure we are partnering with only a few select high quality projects (the filtering), and then we are able to direct all of our funds into those few select projects, which also keeps our overheads low and means we can put almost all of the funds raised (more than 95%) into actually delivering services (the funnelling).

EN: *Your charity has a focus on education, including university scholarships, vocational training and digital literacy. What is behind the decision to focus on education as the goal for the Reasonable Cause Inc projects?*

MD: Education empowers people so that they can stand on their own feet. I really believe in the idea of a hand up rather than a handout. The best thing we can do for disadvantaged young Cambodians is to help them get a job – whether that be from a university education or a vocational skill. There's no social security in Cambodia – if you don't have a job, you don't have any money to survive. A year of university study in Cambodia is about \$600USD on average, depending on the degree. We have one scholarship recipient, Sievhong, who is studying pharmacy which is a lot more (\$3000 USD). That amount doesn't sound like a lot when you compare it to university costs here. But when you compare it to the monthly salary of a garment worker or a rice farmer, it's impossible for most families in Cambodia to afford. You may as well ask them to fly to the moon, that's how impossible it is for them. The Reasonable Cause CPD scholarships can change that and create opportunities for these young adults to get a university degree and break that cycle – we give these kids a hand up, so that they can go on to change their own lives.



Moto Doctors Vocational Program



Mark Dennis SC with Hor aged 5 in 2007



Hor (2021) Reasonable Cause CPD scholarship recipient



Sievhong (2020) Reasonable Cause CPD Scholarship recipient

EN: *How do you decide what partnerships or projects Reasonable Cause Inc participates in?*

MD: We select our partners for the joint projects based on strict criteria, which are set out in detail on the Reasonable Cause Inc website. All of our partners have to share objectives consistent with Reasonable Cause in terms of education for disadvantaged youth in Cambodia, but also they need to have stable finances, stable and effective governance, low overheads, and an excellent key person.

EN: *What is the project that you are most excited about at the moment?*

MD: At the moment I'm really excited about our newest program, 'Moto Doctor' which is a vocational program. Participants complete the program with a government recognised trade qualification as a motorcycle mechanic ('moto doctor'). Many of the young adults participating didn't finish school, or they've been diverted into the program after a brush with the law. When they complete the program not only do they have their motorcycle mechanic qualification, but there's also the opportunity for business mentoring and 'seed money' to start a motorcycle repair business. In August (2022) I travelled to Cambodia to see the project in action, and I'm really excited to see the opportunities it's creating.

EN: *Can you tell me about a few of the beneficiaries of the university scholarships and where they are at with their studies?*

MD: Of course. I've already mentioned our 2020 recipient Sievhong who is studying pharmacy. She had originally commenced a Bachelor of International Relations but had a change of heart at the end of first year. She was contemplating changing to a Bachelor of Pharmacy but thought it would cost too much. When I told Sievhong that

Reasonable Cause CPD would cover all costs she burst into tears. Now, she's finishing her second year of that degree. Another recipient is an absolute rock star of a kid called Hor, who was the 2021 scholarship recipient. I actually met Hor during one of my first trips to Cambodia in 2007 when he was five years old and living at the out of home care facility in Phnom Penh. He's studying a Bachelor of Information Technology at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, which is the most prestigious tertiary institution in Cambodia. He is about to start his third year of the degree and his scholarship has been able to pay for his university fees, a laptop, a smart phone and a motorbike to travel to and from campus. His ambition is to become an App developer after he graduates. These are just a few examples. We have profiles of all the recipients on the Reasonable Cause CPD website so that people can keep updated with their progress.

EN: *How has COVID-19 impacted Reasonable Cause Inc's work?*

MD: I usually go to Cambodia twice a year, so obviously I couldn't do that during the COVID-19 pandemic. But otherwise, there wasn't too much impact luckily. The scholarship recipients all get a laptop and a smart phone as part of their scholarship, so they were able to keep up with their university studies throughout the pandemic.

EN: *How do you balance your work as founder and Chairperson of Reasonable Cause Inc with your work as a barrister?*

MD: With difficulty! I burn the candle at both ends – but it's a lot of fun.

EN: *What do you consider the personal benefits of your work with Reasonable Cause Inc?*

MD: I hadn't done a lot of philanthropy before, and what no one had ever told me was

the immense feeling of personal satisfaction that it gives you. It's like a form of adrenaline! You can't change the world, or even a country – but you can take a handful of individual lives and change those lives. And the feeling when you do, it's pretty incredible.

EN: *What are some of your hopes and goals for Reasonable Cause Inc in 2023?*

MD: My goal for 2023 is to get a vocational program for young women going. I feel like we have programs in tertiary education, high school and primary school for both males and females, and we have the 'moto doctor' vocational program for young men now, so I'd like the next step for Reasonable Cause Inc to be setting up a joint project in vocational training for disadvantaged young Cambodian women.

EN: *How can NSW barristers get involved and support Reasonable Cause Inc?*

MD: Attend the next Reasonable Cause CPD conference on 25 March 2023! You can also donate on a one-off or monthly basis by visiting <https://rccharity.net.au/donate/>. All donations over \$2 are tax deductible. **BN**

'With my Own Two Hands' is a regular column in *Bar News*, which looks at ways in which barristers and the judiciary are improving local, regional and international communities 'with their own two hands' (with acknowledgement to the Ben Harper song of the same name). To suggest subjects for future interviews, please email Elizabeth Nicholson at enicholson@odpp.nsw.gov.au.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Regina v CHOUH, OUM, SREY, YIN, CHEA, BS and LEOUNG* [2007] NSWDC 253; *R v CHEA, Chhengy* [2008] NSWCCA 78.