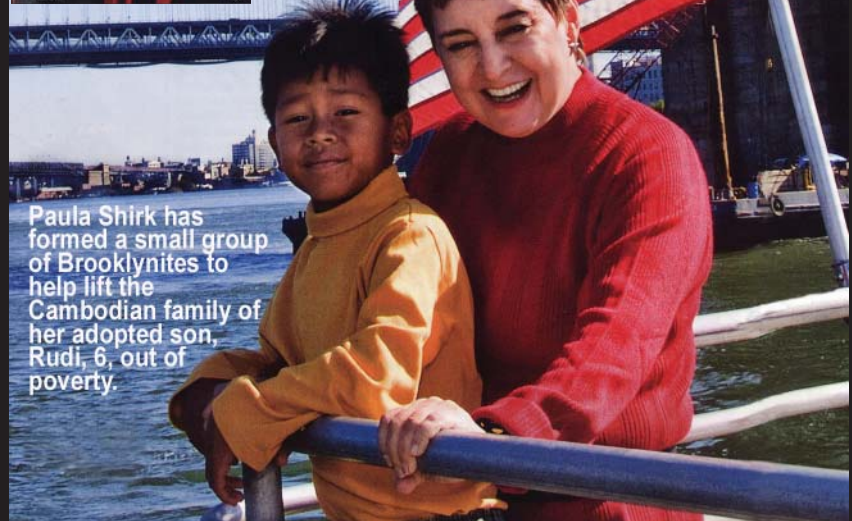


Contribute New York:

November/December 2007

As featured in Mainstream Medicis section

Contribute



Paula Shirk has formed a small group of Brooklynites to help lift the Cambodian family of her adopted son, Rudi, 6, out of poverty.

Paula Shirk/Ysa Osman Brooklyn Bridge to Cambodia

feature

30 TRENDS
MAINSTREAM MEDICIS

Smaller-scale, 1-to-1 giving takes off

BY JOAN OLECK AND LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES



Photography by Dan Demetriad

A small group from Brooklyn and an Italian cow are helping sustain a family in Cambodia. The Italian cow—that's her breed, not her nationality—is named Sylvia Poggioli, for National Public Radio's Rome correspondent. Last April, Sylvia (the cow, not the correspondent) gave birth to a male calf, which in turn was named—because of its future as a stud—Fabio, after the Italian model.

There's more: The cow arrived safely in the Cambodian village of Phum Thom, thanks to the efforts of Brooklyn's Paula Shirk and her core crew of four borough supporters, who purchased the animal for \$1,300 and continue to donate necessities to the village and the birth parents of Paula's adopted Cambodian son, Rudi.

Rudi, now six years old, was born with the birth name Puth Chak to a woman named Ol Srun and her husband Chak. Because Chak left Srun when she was three months pregnant with three older children to raise, and because the family already was in desperate straits, Srun agreed in 2003, when Puth was 17 months, to give him up for adoption by Shirk.

Rudi was accompanied by a photo of his pretty, young birth mother and three birth siblings, two boys and a girl under ten. All stared into the camera of the adoption facilitator. All were clearly bewildered, sad, their makeshift hut behind them. Their faces showed hunger, for Shirk, the photo became a motivating force. "I didn't want Rudi at 18 to say to me," You knew the despair my family lived in, and you did nothing."

So Shirk contacted a human rights worker in Phnom Penh who put her in touch with Ysa Osman, a bilingual Cambodian researcher who documents Khmer Rouge atrocities. Through the efforts of the Cambodian Red Cross and Osman, the birth family was located and it asked to write to Shirk. A letter followed.

Chak, it turned out, had returned to his family; the family had moved to the Cambodian capital, looking for work. When Osman found them, they were living up against a factory fence. Sewage, Osman reported, regularly backed into their hut during the rainy season, causing illnesses. Even so, that first family letter, in 2005, put a positive spin on things: "We're all fine but homeless," they wrote.

Shirk e-mailed Osman after hearing from the family and immediately wired \$55, which Osman used to buy five bags of a food product called bi chen, ten cans of milk, 12 cans of fish, vegetable oil, two boxes of noodles, and one sack of rice. Shirk also asked the family: Where do you want to live? What else do you need to support yourself? Would you allow your children to be educated?

What Srun and Chak wanted most immediately was a scooter to help them transport fish and vegetables from their village to a market stall in Phnom Penh. Done. A few months later, in December 2005, the photos and the letters Osman translated showed a health, well-fed family. Home had become a rental in a well-kept building. Cost: \$66 a month and the children were in school full-time.

In April 2006, Shirk began to expand her goodwill network, hosting a fundraiser in Brooklyn. Osman, in New York for a lecture, spoke. More than \$2,500 was raised and Sylvia, the cow, was purchased. A core group, which included Shirk, her sister and three Brooklyn friends, materialized. "Brooklyn Bridge to Cambodia, Inc." filed for a 501 (c) (3) status, and Osman set up as an NGO to coordinated further aid.

Five Hundred soccer uniforms for the classmates of Srun's children were shipped in autumn 2006, and Heifer International, the big aid organization, was asked to coordinate the village's economic revival. And still Shirk wants more. Never mind that she makes a modest living from a small dog-walking business and she is supporting not just Rudi but her biological son, Eli, 11. Already she had donated about \$3,000, and she's just getting started. Shirk now wants to help Osman's village, which was decimated by the Khmer Rouge, and Osman, himself, realize his dream of building an orphanage for Cambodia's street children. "I don't think of this as a mom-and Pop organization," Shirk says. "I think we can keep growing. It's only been two years and look how much we've done." - Joan Oleck