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Unsung Hero: Carson Harte

by Zach Wall and Suzanne Tice [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

For more than 15 years, Carson Harte's work with The Cambodia Trust has been at the core of physical-rehabilitation efforts throughout Southeast Asia, a region whose legacy of conflict has made the need for trained professionals like prosthetists and orthotists invaluable. The Cambodia Trust—a nongovernmental organization based in the United Kingdom—addresses that need, and as its Executive Director, Harte has overseen the organization's expanding operations in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

Throughout the 1980s, Carson Harte practiced as a prosthetist and orthotist in Belfast, Northern Ireland, advising on and fitting¹ assistive devices. Many of his patients were survivors of conflict. In 1989, he founded a physical-rehabilitation company with offices in Belfast and Dublin, which he had ran until a chance encounter with one of The Cambodia Trust's founders. Then, in 1993, Harte's professional career took a dramatic turn that brought him and his family—wife Audrey and their daughter Ashley—more than 6,000 miles (9,650 kilometers) around the globe.¹ Audrey took a management/administrative position in Cambodia with the Irish NGO Concern; she later ran an orphanage (where they adopted a second child, Serey), and eventually worked as a management and consular officer with the British embassy in Phnom Penh. Later, in 1999–2000, she joined The Cambodia Trust, working alongside her husband to produce a strategic plan for the development of prosthetic and orthotic services in SE Asia.

Doing it Right

By the time Carson Harte arrived in Cambodia in 1993, The Cambodia Trust had established two rehabilitation centers in Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville. Although estimates of the extent of landmine contamination vary, the current number of landmine survivors in Cambodia is greater than 40,000.² Another 50,000 people have been affected by polio. Yet in 1994, trained Cambodian prosthetists and orthotists were rare, if not nonexistent—a grim reminder of the Khmer Rouge's systematic extermination of countless educated Cambodians during the 1970s. The Cambodia Trust quickly identified the need to reduce the country's reliance on foreign victim-assistance services by training local specialists.

"Working all my life with people with amputation and complex physical disabilities, I was aware of the huge difference a properly fitted prosthesis or orthosis could make in the life of a client," Harte notes. "When I heard that [The] Cambodia [Trust] wanted to train Cambodian prosthetists, it seemed like a brilliant opportunity to 'do it right' and make a difference."

In 1994, Harte and The Cambodia Trust led efforts to establish the Cambodian School of Prosthetics and Orthotics to meet the demand for local rehabilitation experts. To date, the CSPO has trained prosthetist-orthotists to staff rehabilitation centers across the country, and has attracted students from 15 other countries as well, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sri Lanka.³ According to colleagues, Harte's most significant contributions to the success of the

CSPO were an emphasis on collaboration between stakeholders and making sure students and staff saw the community's role in rehabilitation. "Recognizing that physical rehabilitation was only the first step toward inclusion and self-sufficiency, Carson helped develop linkages between physical rehab and a community-based rehabilitation program [that] helps disabled people [enter] into schools, skills-training and employment," attests Adrienne Liron, fundraising and publicity manager for The Cambodia Trust.



Harte and team examining the work of final year student Harsha Perrera during his final-exam presentation. All photos courtesy of Olle Hjelmstrom / SLSP0

The Cambodia Trust runs the school in collaboration with the Cambodian government, Handicap International, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Veterans International in Cambodia. Although it took time for the local nongovernment organization to reach a consensus, Harte's leadership helped foster a lasting partnership. "Carson believes passionately in making connections, avoiding wasteful duplication and encouraging collaboration—not always an easy task." says Liron.

The success of the CSPO and of Harte's approach has been unparalleled, and 15 years later, Cambodia has become self-sufficient in providing prosthetic and orthotic services. "While NGOs still manage or oversee the [country's] physical rehabilitation centers, no prosthesis or orthosis has been delivered by a foreigner since the early [20]00s," Harte says. Harte's commitment to "quality services for people" has not only led The Cambodia Trust to accreditation from the International Society for Prosthetics and Orthotics, but has also brought the program to ISO 9000-2000 certification, one of the first NGO projects in the world to embrace such high technical and managerial standards.

From Paper to Reality

The CSPO model of quality training and customer-focused service delivery has since been exported throughout the region. Over the past decade, Harte has overseen projects in the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, which will ultimately benefit thousands of disabled people across these nations. As Liron explains, Harte has the ability to "take a complex idea from paper to reality."

In 2004, The Cambodia Trust established its second regional school to train local specialists in Sri Lanka, a nation whose disabled population exceeds 160,000, and whose survivor-assistance capacities are limited. In fact, there are currently only 12 specialists who are sufficiently qualified to perform prosthetics and orthotics services, 10 of whom were trained at the Cambodian School of Prosthetics and Orthotics. A joint effort of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Health, the Nippon Foundation of Japan and The Cambodia Trust led to the Sri Lanka School for Prosthetics and Orthotics.⁴ Harte played an integral role in bringing the project to life, but it was no easy task. "He traveled across Sri Lanka to bring together a local board of governors for the Sri Lanka School of Prosthetics and Orthotics, to ensure that Sri Lankans from all over the island were represented in the program," Liron says.

The SLPSO is currently managed on a day-to-day basis by The Cambodia Trust, but is overseen by a board composed of government representatives, the community, people with disabilities and the donor (The Nippon Foundation). Over the next five years, the Ministry of Health will assume a greater degree of management and financial responsibility. Both of these regional schools are testaments to The Cambodia Trust and to Harte's continued commitment to sustainable development. In Indonesia in early 2009 with the support of the Ministry of Health and The Nippon Foundation, Harte established the Jakarta School of Prosthetics and Orthotics. The three-year JSPO program also offers Indonesian students the opportunity to train to become licensed prosthetist-orthotists. "This is a major step forward to building sustainable, locally run rehabilitation services for the estimated two million Indonesians who need prosthetic limbs or braces to improve their mobility and self-sufficiency," Harte says of the program.⁵

Keeping SA "on the Agenda"

Throughout his career, Harte has actively campaigned alongside disabled people for the rights of people with disabilities throughout the region. While working within the CSPO and its stakeholders, Harte helped co-found the Disability Action Council of Cambodia, which confronts discrimination against disabled individuals head-on, advocates equality in the workplace and coordinates services to the country's extensive disabled population. For his seven years of work in Cambodia, he received the Royal Cambodian Government's Gold Award for Humanitarian Development in



An audience with the King of Cambodia. From left to right: Prum Sovann, Rehabilitation Manager; Mark Inglis, Cambodia Trust Aotearoa-New Zealand patron; Pith Sokra, Administration Manager; His Majesty King Sihamoni of Cambodia; Mary Scott, Country Director; Carson Harte, Executive Director; Kim Sathia, Receptionist; Choun Saroth, Senior Lecturer CSPO; Lim Eng, Prosthetist-Orthotist; Krisna Uk, Trustee. Photo courtesy of the Cambodia Trust

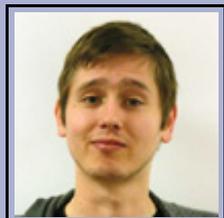
2000. Harte is particularly delighted that Cambodia has recently enacted new legislation bringing increased legal rights to people with disability.

Since 2002, Harte has been the Executive Director of The Cambodia Trust and has worked hard to bring physical rehabilitation where it is needed, not just at a strategic level in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and across the region, but also in one of the smallest and youngest countries in the world, East Timor. Working in the early days after East Timor's independence, The Cambodia Trust made sure people with disabilities were not overlooked. With support from a variety of stakeholders and with the blessing and support of the new government, The Cambodia Trust established "Association for the equality of the disabled people of Timor" (ASSERT), a local organization that provides both physical rehabilitation and community engagement services.

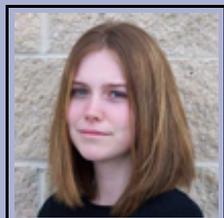
Today, Harte "drives" a laptop for a living and has a healthy jealousy for his team working in the field. He is particularly proud of the young Cambodians and other graduates from so many nations who are skilled, sensitive and dedicated practitioners, working "with" and not "on" people with disability.

With the support of his wife and family, Harte continues to work passionately to bring sustainable quality services, physical rehabilitation and social inclusion to the most marginalized and often poorest people on the planet. He considers himself a very blessed man, and he wistfully thinks of a more boring life (but only occasionally). ↕

Biography



Zach Wall was with the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery as an Editorial Assistant for The Journal from September 2007 through May 2009. He obtained his Bachelor of Arts in sociology at James Madison University in May 2009 and he is now on tour with his band.



Suzanne Tice was an Editorial Assistant for The Journal from January through August 2008. She is pursuing a Master of Arts in technical and scientific communication at James Madison University.

Endnotes

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4. "What We Do: Sri Lanka School of Prosthetics and Orthotics." The Cambodia Trust. <http://www.cambodiastrust.com/slspo.htm>. Accessed 20 February 2009.
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