December 2002

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*Save the Children*

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VVAF and Sports for Life: Promoting Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Rights

by Sarah C. Warren, VVAF

Rehabilitation Redefined

VVAF began implementing programs for people with war-related disabilities in 1992 in Cambodia. In 1991, on their first trip back to southeast Asia since the Vietnam War, VVAF’s founders had been overwhelmed by the images of countless amputees wandering and begging in the streets of Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital. The appalling living conditions and lack of medical treatment witnessed by the returning veterans on this trip inspired them to set up the Kien Khleang Rehabilitation Center, which stands on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Today, VVAF runs a total of four rehabilitation centers throughout Cambodia, as well as the highly successful silk weaving cooperative run by people with disabilities. VVAF also works in seven other war-affected countries around the world, running comprehensive rehabilitation, education and advocacy programs.

As VVAF’s programs have grown, so too has our understanding of how best to help landmine survivors and other people with disabilities return to an active life. VVAF has recognized what is becoming standard thinking among many rehabilitation organizations working in post-war countries: it is not enough simply to provide a person with an artificial limb or a wheelchair. Addressing the broader emotional, social and economic needs of survivors is a critical aspect of the rehabilitation process and should in no way be misconstrued as a luxury. Indeed, without an opportunity to leave their homes and participate in community life—and without enough self-confidence to get them out of the house—people feel they have no reason to work on their protheses or make use of a wheelchair. Follow-up care and outreach services are essential to ensure that devices are appropriately constructed and fitted and being used properly. Beyond this, we must also support survivors in becoming reintegrated into all aspects of community life, including educations, employments, recreations, and social and political activities.

Barriers exist in every society that make such integration challenging, all of them bolstered by one of the largest barriers of all: people’s attitudes towards disability. Problematic are both the self-image of people with disabilities and the perceptions of society as a whole. In the countries in which VVAF works, people with disabilities are typically regarded with pity, scorn, mistrust or complete indifference. In fact, in many places, people with disabilities are practically invisible. Making progress on issues such as accessibility, education and employment requires a shift in attitude toward disability, as well as the adoption and enforcement of appropriate policies. Inclusive and respectful practices must be developed at the family, community and societal levels.

Ultimately, for real and lasting change to occur, people with disabilities must themselves demand reform. They must make themselves visible and insure that their voices be heard. To be effective and far-reaching, this movement for change should be advanced by a united group of people with all types of disabilities. Thus, landmine survivors should come together with people with other types and causes of disability to share their experiences and forge alliances. VVAF’s new Sports for Life initiative is designed to help people do just that, to build a bridge between physical rehabilitation and social reintegration by providing people with the opportunity to come together around sports and recreational activities and begin advocating for themselves.

Sport as an Entry Point

The basic concept underlying Sports for Life is that that sport can be used as a powerful vehicle for change. On the individual level, sports and recreation play an important part in promoting physical health and mobility, as well as emotional well-being and self-confidence. At the same time, sports and recreation activities provide people with disabilities an opportunity—sometimes their first opportunity—to come together to share ideas and experiences. What begins as a conversation about sport typically evolves into a conversation about accessibility, employment or education. Also, because of its wide appeal, sport provides an inviting and positive way to increase the visibility of people with disabilities in their communities, drawing attention to their strengths and abilities. Also, sports and recreation activities can be integrated so that able-bodied people play with people with disabilities in a fun, cooperative setting. Thus, sports can be regarded as an entry point to working on a variety of other issues that are significant to people with disabilities.

Reversal of Fortune

In Cambodia, people have traditionally looked upon disability as a sign of bad karma, meaning that people with disabilities evidently brought misfortune upon themselves through some wrongdoing in a previous life. The disabled volleyball players supported by VVAF’s Sports for Life program no longer buy into that conception of disability. The Cambodian National Volleyball Team for the Disabled currently ranks fourth in the world in standing volleyball. Standing volleyball is a sport played by people with a fairly high level of mobility, such as people with a single arm or leg amputation, and people with limited paralysis, such as some polio survivors. VVAF has supported the national team since 1999, when it was training for the 2001 Paralympics Games in Sydney, Australia. Cambodia won only one of its five matches in Australia, but returned to the practice court at VVAF’s Kien Khleang Rehabilitation Center determined to train harder than ever and increase its level of play. With support from its sponsor, Cathay Pacific, and singer-songwriter Nanci Griffith, VVAF sent the team to the World Cup Games in Slovakia in 2001. There, the team played...
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an outstanding tournament, narrowly losing in the battle for the bronze medal.

The efforts of the volleyballers are having a great impact on Cambodian society, as well as the lives of individual players. Cambodians take pride in the achievements of their team, while young people with disabilities are finding new role models to emulate. What is more, the players are demonstrating an unprecedented level of self-confidence. The team’s coordinator, Chris Minho, noted that “some of the players have been strutting through the streets of Phnom Penh wearing shorts and showing off their possibilities,” a scene that would have been unimaginable in Cambodia just two short years ago.

In June and July of 2002, VVAF coordinated the first ever national league competition for people with disabilities. Three teams from Phnom Penh and Phnom Penh province) out of provincial teams traveled to the Kien Khleang Center to participate. The first year of the league proved to be a resounding success. Particularly exciting was the zeal with which former national team players set out to recruit and train new teams members. Local businesses, government leaders and media organizations also threw their support behind the effort, reflecting a significant change in attitude toward athletes with disabilities and people with disabilities in general.

At the end of the league competition, a selection competition was held and a new national team was identified to play in the upcoming Far East Asian (FEASPC) games in October 2002 in Busan, Korea. This new team is determined to add gold medal to the long list of remarkable achievements of Cambodia’s volleyballers who have already established themselves as major Cambodia’s volleyball teams.

In the coming year, VVAF plans to expand its Sports for Life activities in Cambodia. The national league will be expanded from eight teams to 12, and a new federation will be established to oversee future development of disabled volleyball in the country. The national team will hold a competition against one of its regional neighbors. Also, VVAF will implement a training program for its rehabilitation staff in order to increase the use of sports and recreational activities within VVAF’s rehabilitation centers. Finally, VVAF will conduct a detailed assessment to determine how best to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in sports and recreation. This program since its inception, incorporating online awareness training into soccer clinics and helping youths organize sports events through which they spread mine awareness to their peers. VVAF also implemented sports activities in isolated minority villages, reaching out to some of the most disadvantaged youth in the province. In 2001, VVAF employed programs to develop specialist and wheelchair athlete Andrew Houghorn to initiate VVAF’s disability sports and recreation activities in Kosovo. Houghorn discovered a great deal of interest in sport throughout the province, but found that most groups did not have the equipment, training or information that they needed to develop meaningful programs. For example, 80 athletes expressed a desire to compete in wheelchair basketball, but only 20 sports chairs could be found in all of Kosovo. Furthermore, rules for the game did not exist in local languages. VVAF translated rules and began providing sports equipment to local groups and schools.

VVAF also learned that many people, disabled and non-disabled alike, had never been exposed to disability sports activities and therefore lacked an understanding of what was possible. Houghorn observed that “many people didn’t even want to try, but after one went out and started to play, the others followed. It’s typical—people never know what it will be like until they get out there and participate.” With this in mind, Houghorn organized three wheelchair tennis clinics, facilitated recreational activities for youth, and brought together disability organizations, the Department of Sport, the Kosovo Olympic Committee, and the tennis and basketball federations to organize a major disability sports and recreation exhibition. After this event, the sponsors signed a joint proclamation declaring their commitment to developing disability sports and recreation programming in Kosovo.

In May 2002, VVAF kicked off its new Sports for Life initiative in Kosovo, building on the work done by Houghorn. Through this new initiative, VVAF is organizing sports and recreation activities that bring people with disabilities together and provide multiple disabilities with disability sports and recreation programming.

A Global Mission

VVAF’s goal is to incorporate Sports for Life into each of its overseas programs as a key component of its work with people with disabilities. In the coming months, VVAF will establish a Sports for Life program in Angola, which will focus on creating a sports and recreation opportunities for children. Planning is also underway for a Sports for Life activities in Vietnam and Ethiopia. Throughout the course of this initiative, VVAF will collect and analyze the experiences of each project so that the lessons of the past can inform the development of future rehabilitation and advocacy programs by VVAF and other organizations.

Endnote

1. VVAF uses the name Veterans International in Cambodia and Angola.

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