



International Network for School Social Work

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My Life in School, Dance and Social Work By Silimanotham Halsana

Laos, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), is a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, bordered by Burma and China to the northwest, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south, and Thailand to the west. The ancient Lao kingdom became part of French Indo-China in the 19th Century, achieved independence in 1953 and for the next 25 years was torn by civil strife between the communist Pathet Lao movement and government supporters. From 1964 to 1973 Laos was heavily bombed as part of the U.S. Secret War in Laos to support the Royal Lao Government against the Pathet Lao and to interdict traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In 1975, The Pathet Lao achieved control, and a communist republic was established.

The population of around 6.5 million is mostly rural. There are several dozen ethnic groups each with their own language, culture, traditions, music and art. Theravada Buddhism has a prevailing influence on most aspects of the Lao culture, including the art, architecture, performing arts and literature. Lao classical music, Lao classical dance and drama owe their origins to the ceremonial performances for the former Laotian Royal Courts and are often based on the Lao poem, Ramayana, however Lao folk music (*lam*) and folk dance have traditionally been more popular among the general population. The national instrument is a wind instrument made of bamboo known as the *khaen*, which is believed to have prehistoric origins and is still commonly used in folk music and even in Laotian pop music today.

Lao people are renowned for their easygoing nature and generally live a slower paced way of life than those in surrounding countries. This aspect of Lao culture that influences every day life can be summarized as "*baw pen nyang*" – "No problems - it'll be OK". Family and religion are of utmost importance to Lao people, with social activities traditionally centering on the extended family and the temple. The majority of Lao citizens lives in villages or rural areas, and between 70 to 80% of the population still rely on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods, with rice the main crop. As a result rice is the staple food and also has religious and cultural significance amongst the different ethnic groups, including some traditions and rituals related to its cultivation and its consumption. <http://www.destination-asia.com/laos/about/culture/>

Social work, dance, music and art change my life

I was born in Donkoi village, near the capital, Vientiane, and attended Donkoi primary school, near my house. When I was very little I was always interested in Lao classical dance from watching television. I was inspired by my older brother who studied Lao traditional music and my father who worked at the National Dance and Music school, but I did not have opportunity to practice a lot until I finished grade 4. When I went to Mr. Khamvanh's house at "Donkoi Children's Development Center (DCDC)" to play with other children, I listened to Lao traditional music and started showing other children Lao classical dance.

Donkoi Children Development Center (DCDC) was founded that same year (1998) by social worker Mme Xuyen Dangers as a pilot project of after school activities for a public primary school. DCDC's philosophy is to provide children opportunities and empowerment through traditional games and activities such as farming, gardening, carpentry, weaving and basket making. Lao culture including traditional music and dance is a central part of the program. The goals are to prevent children from dropping out of school, abusing drugs, delinquency, and being trafficked. The focus is on developing children's potential, interests, talents, responsibilities and leadership skills. DCDC pays attention of the poorest and most disadvantaged. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVK7bq7IVLE>

When I finished grade 5, I took an entrance exam for the National School of Art, Music and Dance, which is close to Donkoi village. I studied there for 7 years. Each day when I came back from the school around 3 pm I stopped at Donkoi school, parked my bike, took off my hat and sweat shirt. I would teach the children how to dance from what I had learned in school and slowly I began to choreograph. I also learned a little bit of music and began to play the Lao xylophone, drum, piano by ear and also by learning with my older brother.

In 2006, I graduated from the National Dance and Music and then I worked full time with DCDC. When I finished my study I just wanted to continue to study Master of dance and music. One day Mme Xuyen asked me "What is your dream and what subjects do you like to study?" At that time I did not know. Seeing my interest in music, and art, she took me to Thailand to see many places to explore possibilities for my further study in traditional expressive arts. The visits included the Patravadi Theater, the National Dance and Music School in Bangkok and Chulalongkorn University. I also visited Mahasarakham University to learn about storytelling with Dr. Wajuppa Tossa, the Thai storyteller. Later that summer 2006, Mme Xuyen took me to Manila, the Philippines.



Sili teaching the Monkey Dance at DCDC

Becoming a social worker

I enjoyed traveling and gaining new experience in the Philippines. On the plane flying home, Mme Xuyen asked me the same question and by then I knew what my dream for the future was, I wanted to be a social worker like Mme Xuyen. In 2007 I began 5 years of study at the National University of Laos in the Faculty of Sociology and Social Development, while working full time with DCDC as Director of Children in the after school program, teaching Lao Traditional Dance and Music to teachers, volunteers and students and also teaching about drama, storytelling, painting and other activities. That is how I became a social worker.

I help children and youth develop their talent and potential using the dance, music and drama that I am so familiar with. While having fun with dance the children also develop creativity and improve in physical development, body movement and meditation. The children are more involved with the traditional dance and drama that are part of their culture than with modern styles. Using the traditional dance, music and drama as tools we can approach issues in society, and help children and youth understand their problems, learn to transform problems in positive ways and build peace and strong relationships with others.

With the perspective of a professional dancer, musical artist and social worker I realize that multiple intelligence is very important for those who work in groups, organizations and community, especially the leaders, teachers, volunteers and social workers. I use dance, music and art related to the social work perspective to help children and youth develop their abilities because I believe all children and youth have potential. If we give them opportunities they will develop their potential to the fullest.