

By Liew Hanqing

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PLUMBERS? Check. Technicians? Check. Bakers? Check. These are just some of the roles a group of young entrepreneurs had to fill in the course of setting up a new cookie boutique in Cambodia.

The team, consisting of past and current Singapore Management University (SMU) students, started the business with the goal of providing employment for the less fortunate in Cambodia.

Team member Kiri Ong, 27, a former SMU student, said the group decided to start the business after a trip to Cambodia in 2006, taking donations and supplies to a village near Phnom Penh.

"We were moved by the people there – they are so poor, and there is so much we can do to help," he said.

"We didn't want to just take them donations and have it end there. We wondered how we could sustain the effort to help them."

After several brainstorming sessions, the team drafted a business proposal to present to potential investors.

"We decided to sell cookies because there didn't seem to be any businesses selling food which tourists could take home," he said.

FUNDING

They managed to secure about \$130,000 in funding from independent investors to help start their business, which they named Camory Food Industries, marrying the words "Cambodia" and "Memory".

About half of the amount went towards renting and renovating the shop in Phnom Penh's tourist hub, by the Sisowath river, while the rest has been used for working capital.

Mr Ong's teammate, Miss Veth Sokly, 21, an SMU undergraduate from Cambodia, said setting up the business was no walk in the park.

She said: "There were electrical problems – the voltages of appliances didn't match. We didn't have any technical skills, but we had to learn them."

She recalled an incident where there was a sewerage leak in the shop, which covered the floor with dirty water.

"To make things worse, the plumber we hired wasn't very skilled – he kept hammering the wrong places," she said.

RECIPES

Another issue the team faced was coming up with the right recipes for the cookies.

Mr Ong said it took nearly two months before the team managed to produce cookies of the right texture.

And while setting up the shop's kitchen, Mr Ong recalled nearly being crushed while carrying a 400kg oven up a narrow spiral staircase.

Recalled Miss Veth: "I was so scared – I just kept crying, and didn't know what to do."

Added another team member, Mr Tha Sothun, 22, also an SMU undergraduate from Cambodia: "There were all these challenges we didn't plan for."



◆ The SMU team with their Cambodian employees in the Camory cookie boutique in Phnom Penh.

Picture: Courtesy of KIRI ONG

A sweet recipe to help the poor in Cambodia

"There were legal procedures in Cambodia which we had to find out more about. These procedures also differ between officers."

These hiccups delayed the shop's opening by over a month, but they eventually opened their doors for business on 25 Jul last year.

They now have 10 Cambodian employees, hired as bakers and counter staff.

The team says they hope to break even by the end of the year, and are looking to expand the business by getting Singapore distributors to sell their cookies.

PROFITS

The investors can hope to make some profits eventually, while the Cambodians can hope to remain employed.

Said Mr Ong: "SMU has always been very supportive of social enterprise, and we are grateful for their help."

The university's social entrepreneurship club, SMU Initiatives for Social Enterprise (SMU-ISE), encourages students to pursue projects which help the less privileged achieve financial independence.

Some of its other projects include Project HOME, in collaboration with the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics.

Migrant workers were trained in basic computer skills and then given business card data entry assignments.

Assoc Prof Low Aik Meng, SMU's dean of students, said the university encourages its students to develop their social entrepreneurial skills.

"We are glad that these students drew on their inspiration after their humanitarian outreach and embarked on this social enterprise."