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8-3-2010

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University Relations, "Relationship with Cambodian school children leads to long-term service learning project for Wente '13" (2010). *Campus News Archive*. 1522.
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Relationship with Cambodian school children leads to long-term service learning project for Wente '13

Summary: Wente and her alumni parents, Mark '87 and Lori Halverson-Wente '88, Dodge Center, have been instrumental in planning and implementing projects focused on the people of Cambodia.

(August 3, 2010)-Morris student Naomi Wente '13, and her alumni parents, Mark '87 and Lori Halverson-Wente '88, Dodge Center, have been instrumental in planning, implementing, and participating in an international service learning program focused on the people of Cambodia. The program, through Rochester Community and Technical College, was honored with the Community College National Center for Community Engagement 2010 Service Learning Collaborations Award.

Wente remembers a call she received, right in the middle of volleyball practice, from her excited parents when she was only 14-years-old. The proposal was to take, through Rochester Community and Technical College where they both work, a trip to Cambodia to experience the culture and do service work. Having never been on an airplane before, she was nervous but excited. Wente, younger brother Jordan, and her parents were off to Cambodia before they knew it.

Wente says, "The trip had a huge impact on me."

During the trip, Wente noticed things that made her want to lend a hand to the kind Cambodians. Using the restroom turned out to be a life changing experience. "I asked to use the restroom at the school we were at, and they directed me to behind the building in the grass," Wente remembers. She started asking questions and recognized a great need for improved sanitation, wells, and toilets. "Talking to the young women at the school was my motivation," Wente says.

This was the birth of 14-year-old Wente's service project "One Toilet at a Time—Sustainable Sanitation." At the start of the project, Wente and brother Jordan posted flyers asking for donations to raise funds for a toilet for the school. When donations started raining in, the family was pleasantly surprised, and went straight into action.

Wente's project was nominated for an online contest for youth service and won, raising even more funds for the project. No longer was the toilet project based on just church funds and the family's money.

The following year, the Wente family returned to Cambodia with a service group and connected with Phnom Penh Royal University students. The university students helped with the logistics of the project including well and toilet placement. All the new faces helping with the project was a joy for everyone involved. "It makes for a really dynamic trip. You learn so much from the people you are traveling with as well as the people in Cambodia," says Wente.

Now, as a Morris student, Wente has been raising funds with the help of Morris student organizations to continue to support the projects in Cambodia. Thanks to Karen Mumford, Morris assistant professor of biology, Wente learned assessments techniques to evaluate the work she did when she was younger and to survey the success of her work. With grant support from the Morris Commission on Women, she traveled to Cambodia during 2010 Winter Break to perform follow-up assessment on wells and toilets constructed since the project began.

In total, Wente has now traveled to Cambodia four times. She says she doesn't plan on stopping any time soon. She encourages others to find a passion and follow it.

"If you have a dream, follow it. It sounds corny but it's really not," Wente says. "Your dream doesn't have to stop when you go to sleep."

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