

A FRIEND INDEED

Before Friends Without A Border's first fundraiser in Hong Kong, Kenro Izu tells Oliver Giles of the shocking poverty that spurred him to found the charity, and of the philosophy behind its healthcare

Kenro Izu set off on a pilgrimage in the mid-1970s to photograph the world's most sacred sites. Part spiritual trek, part photographic mission, this journey began at the feet of the Egyptian pyramids, then continued to Stonehenge in England, Palmyra in Syria and, eventually, to Angkor Wat.

But when Izu reached Cambodia in 1995, he found himself getting sidetracked. He was trying to focus on photographing the country's spectacular temples, yet all he could think about were the thousands of ill and impoverished children around Siem Reap. How had so many children been maimed by landmines? Why were so many of them suffering from preventable diseases? When Izu visited a local hospital to find out more about the humanitarian crisis facing the country, he stumbled on a father who couldn't afford US\$2 for his daughter's treatment. Before Izu could fish the money from his wallet, the girl died in front of his eyes.

Japanese-born Izu knew he had to do something. He returned to his studio in New York, where he had moved in his early 20s, and began speaking to friends and philanthropists about the situation in Cambodia. With their support, he founded the non-governmental organisation Friends Without A Border in 1996 to provide medical care to children in Southeast Asia. Just three years later, Izu flung open the doors of the not-for-profit Angkor Hospital for Children in Siem Reap. Since it opened, the hospital has treated more than 1.6 million children.

And Izu didn't stop there. In 2015, Friends Without A Border extended its reach into the neighbouring country of Laos, where it opened the Lao Friends Hospital for Children in Luang Prabang. "We wanted to utilise the experience and knowledge we had accumulated over the years for other countries in Southeast Asia," Izu explains. "After gathering statistics, we found that the children of Laos' health situation was as bad as Cambodia in the 1990s."

Both hospitals have a three-pronged approach to healthcare, providing treatment,

outreach programmes and educational initiatives. The latter is one of Friends Without A Border's greatest successes. "At the Angkor Hospital for Children, we train up to 1,000 Cambodian health workers each year," Izu says. "We even have students come from the capital city of Phnom Penh to receive advanced training." Today, 98 per cent of the more than 500 staff are Cambodian.

The Lao Friends Hospital for Children has only been open for two years but already has both outpatient and inpatient services, an emergency room, a neonatal unit and laboratory facilities. Now that the hospital is up and running, Izu hopes to take its outreach services to the next level. "The hospital's outreach programme is currently limited to home care and HIV/Aids follow-up, but we are hoping to expand our outreach services in the coming year," Izu says.

All of this can only be achieved thanks to the generosity of donors around the world. Izu hosts a variety of fundraisers each year, including the famous Friends of Friends Photography Auction in New York, for which many of the world's top photographers donate their work. "One day I received a message from Irving Penn's secretary to come visit his studio in Manhattan," Izu remembers. "When I saw him for the first time in his studio, he congratulated me on the charity and signed his book *Passage* with 'To heroic Kenro.' He was a regular donor of his work until he passed away. In his will, he actually left a wish for his estate to continue to donate his art to Friends Without A Border. I'm so honoured."

Friends Without A Border is hosting its first fundraiser in Hong Kong on November 21 at the China Club. "I'm hoping to make friends for life in Hong Kong," Izu says. "We'll enjoy nice wine and food, and at the same time we'll share our compassion to help the children of Asia. I consider all donors or benefactors as my friends. The projects of Friends Without A Border are the result of the friendship." ●

For more information about Friends Without A Border and to buy tickets to the Hong Kong fundraiser, visit fwab.org