

Sovann: A Proud Member of M'Lop Tapang's Student Representative Group



M'Lop Tapang's 2022 Student Representative Group. Sovann is pictured front and center

"It is very important to have good youth representatives because they are a group who can report and advocate to help children if we see something wrong or any violence or abuse towards children." - Sovann*, Student Representative

Each year the boys and girls at M'Lop Tapang's Education Center elect a group of Student Representatives. The role of this group is to advocate and be a voice for other students, helping to find solutions if they are having problems amongst themselves, bringing concerns to teachers or staff, sharing information and communications from teachers to students and from students to teachers. As we know, many times students are more comfortable disclosing concerns and worries to their peers than to adults and the Student Representatives help to be the conduits. To make sure all the other students who they are, they are formally introduced in each classroom after being elected and posters bearing their names and faces are displayed prominently at the Education Center.

One of the members of the 2022 Student Representative group is 21 year old Sovann, who has been involved with M'Lop Tapang for many years.

Sovann, like almost of the children we work with, grew up in poverty. He was born in Kratie Province and had started school there but had to drop out in Grade 3 because his single parent mother could not afford to keep sending him to study. When he was 13 years old his mother sent him to live in Sihanoukville after hearing there was a place that he could study for free. After moving here, he starting attending non-formal education (NFE) classes at M'Lop Tapang and even admits he wasn't exactly the most stand out student at the beginning. ***"At first I didn't want to study very much. I just wanted to have fun with my friends"*** he said, ***"But after I started to study and learned some things, it made me want to learn more."*** For 2 years he attended MT's NFE program to catch up with his studies before reintegrating back in to the public school system at Grade 7 level with the support of M'Lop Tapang 'Back to School' program.

His background and life experience made him an ideal Student Representative here. The children that M'Lop Tapang regularly work with come from backgrounds not so different than Sovann's; coming from poor families, facing obstacles in getting an education, and dreaming of a better future for themselves and their families. ***"Helping people doesn't come from having money."*** he says, ***"It depends what's in their heart. If we don't have money, we can use what we know to help others. We can find other ways to offer support."***

Nop Buntheary, M'Lop Tapang's Counseling Team Leader, is one of the staff who meet regular with the members of the group and understands their value. ***"Youth like Sovann who are in student rep group play such an important role. I know that sometimes other students find it easier to talk to them about problems rather than approaching the adults. Many times they have helped to solve problems between children, including the bullying that happens sometimes in schools."***

Being a member in the Student Representative group is also a chance for these youth to grow as individuals themselves. It is an opportunity for them to develop leadership and communication skills, to learn about teamwork and undertake new responsibilities, and to know the feeling that comes from making a positive contribution to others. These are all things that will benefit them in their futures in both their professional and personal lives.

Moreover, the group also plays a part in making the organization stronger. As Roth Chanphalkun, Co-Director of M'lop Tapang explains ***"The Student Representative Group helps to***



Sovann, talking with one of the students at MT's Education Center

make M'Lop Tapang better by providing us, the management team, with feedback on programs and individuals. They are young and represent their own generation and sometimes have ideas that we don't. We sometimes even have members of the group to join our bi-annual Board of Directors meetings because it really helps the Board to get a broader view of our work by hearing the voices of the clients we directly work with."

This isn't Sovann's first time being elected to the group but it will be his last. *"I have been one of Youth Representatives for many years and this is the last year of being one because I will be graduating from high school. I am going to teach all new members to be good and responsible people so that they can make children trust them to share their feelings easily."*

Although this is his last year as one of the Youth Representative there is no doubt he will continue to help to shape the next cadre of young people wanting to make a difference and help others. As 14 year old Tita*, one of the newest members elected to the group, said *"I feel it is unbelievable that I passed the vote. I feel very excited and nervous too. I have a lot of things that I don't know but I'm not afraid of trying it because I know that the teachers and other members especially Sovann will help me."*

*names changed for confidentiality