

Sel's Family Refused to Leave Him Behind

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Link: <https://www.smiletrain.org/stories/sels-family-refused-leave-him-behind>

Each time she passed a child with an untreated cleft, Soan would feel pity for the whole family. Clefts were mysterious to her; all she knew was that these poor children would be discriminated against their whole lives, even barred from entering school.

When she and her husband, Mao, had a son with a cleft lip and palate, their hearts ached for him. Thankfully, their entire community was supportive, but they soon learned clefts had life-threatening consequences and were not only social or cosmetic as she had assumed.

The baby, whom they named Sel, struggled to eat because breastmilk would go through the hole in the roof of his mouth into his throat and sinuses, causing him to choke. Sel constantly wailed with hunger and was in danger of dying. Soan found that she could feed her son by soaking cotton in milk then letting it drip into his mouth; that was enough to keep him alive, but he was still severely underweight.

When Sel was a year old, Soan's sister in Phnom Penh told the family that a mission-based organization would be flying into the city soon to perform cleft surgeries for free. The family traveled to the capital to find more people with clefts than they had ever seen in one place, all no less desperate than they to give their children the gift of health and belonging. They stood in the crowd and waited for three days, only to watch the mission fly off back to America while Sel screamed from hunger.

But in that moment of pain was hidden the first spark of hope. While packing up to go home, someone told the family about a hospital in nearby Takmao that performed free cleft surgeries every day of the year thanks to Smile Train and its model of empowering local healthcare workers in their own hospitals. A short while later, Sel received a Smile Train-sponsored surgery to heal his cleft lip. About a year later — when his doctors determined the time was right — he received a second free surgery to heal his cleft palate.

That was 10 years ago. Today, Sel is an adventurous boy who excels at school, especially literature and math, and loves playing tennis and *liang cheung muy*, a traditional Cambodian hopping game, with his friends. Though he doesn't remember life with an untreated cleft, his parents have made sure he recognizes his baby pictures in the hopes that when he passes a child with a cleft, he won't show them pity, he'll show them to Smile Train.

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