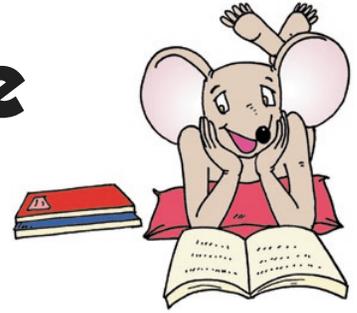


Big Brother Mouse

Annual Report, 2015



Greetings from Laos!

I'd like to start off with some news that made us all proud: Big Brother Mouse is one of two organizations worldwide that was selected to receive the prestigious IBBY-Asahi Reading Promotion Award from the International Board on Books for Young People. This comes with a \$10,000 prize and they'll fly two of us to Auckland in New Zealand, all expenses paid, to receive the award.

Big Brother Mouse turns 10 this year. It was in June 2006 that I applied for and received a business license, then a publishing license. That month we opened our first office.

During that time we've traveled to thousands of schools and villages in Laos, but not often abroad, and rarely have we had opportunities to meet others who are particularly focused on books for children and young people. So we are very much looking forward to IBBY congress in New Zealand, and we feel invigorated by the recognition.



This past year saw a change in our focus: From publishing more books, to seeing that our daily SSR program (Sustained Silent Reading) takes root, works well, and generates word of mouth among teachers and educators that, "Look, it really does work, if we just give children some appealing books, and time to read!"

And while it won't bear fruit for a while, we began and almost finished construction of our new Learning Center & Discovery World.

Details are inside. Thank you for your continued interest and support.

Thank you!
—Khamla Panyasouk, Director

www.BigBrotherMouse.com

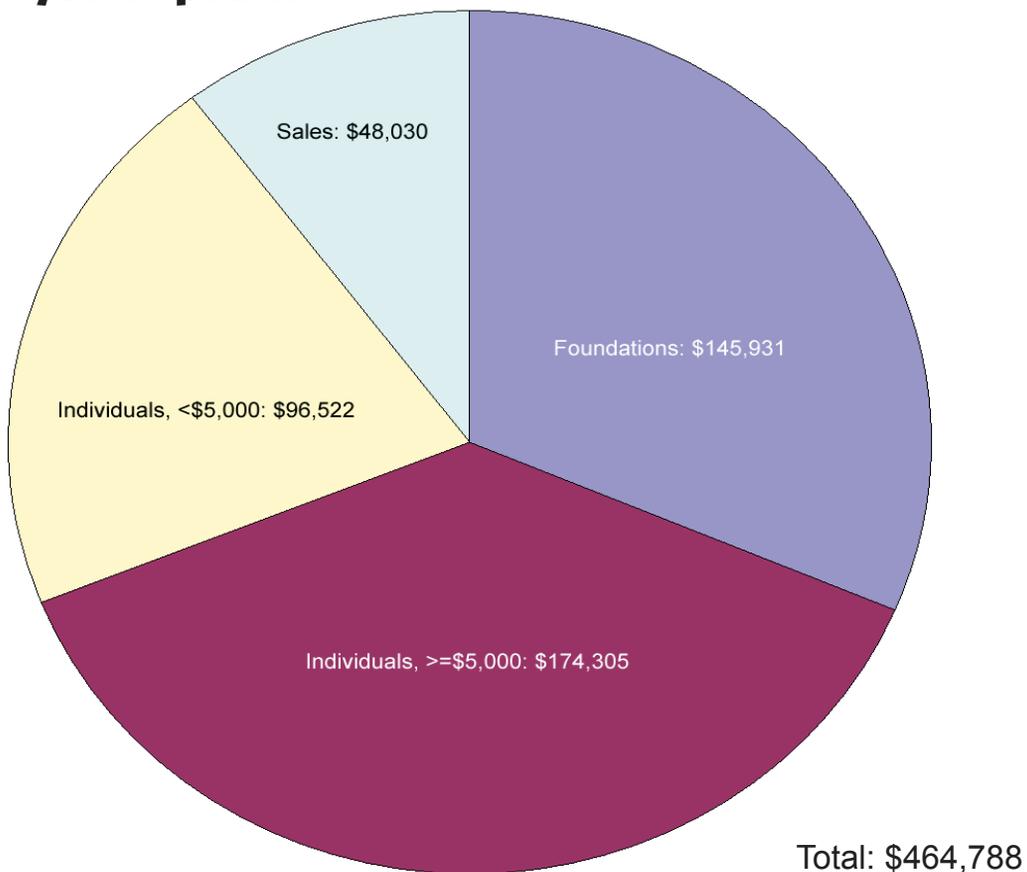
The year in numbers

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Reading program (SSR; with book party)			404	754	367
Books donated (1,000)	178	270	301	419	252
New titles published	40	25	88	54	20
Titles reprinted	9	35	18	29	7
Cumulative numbers:					
Total titles published	174	199	287	341	361

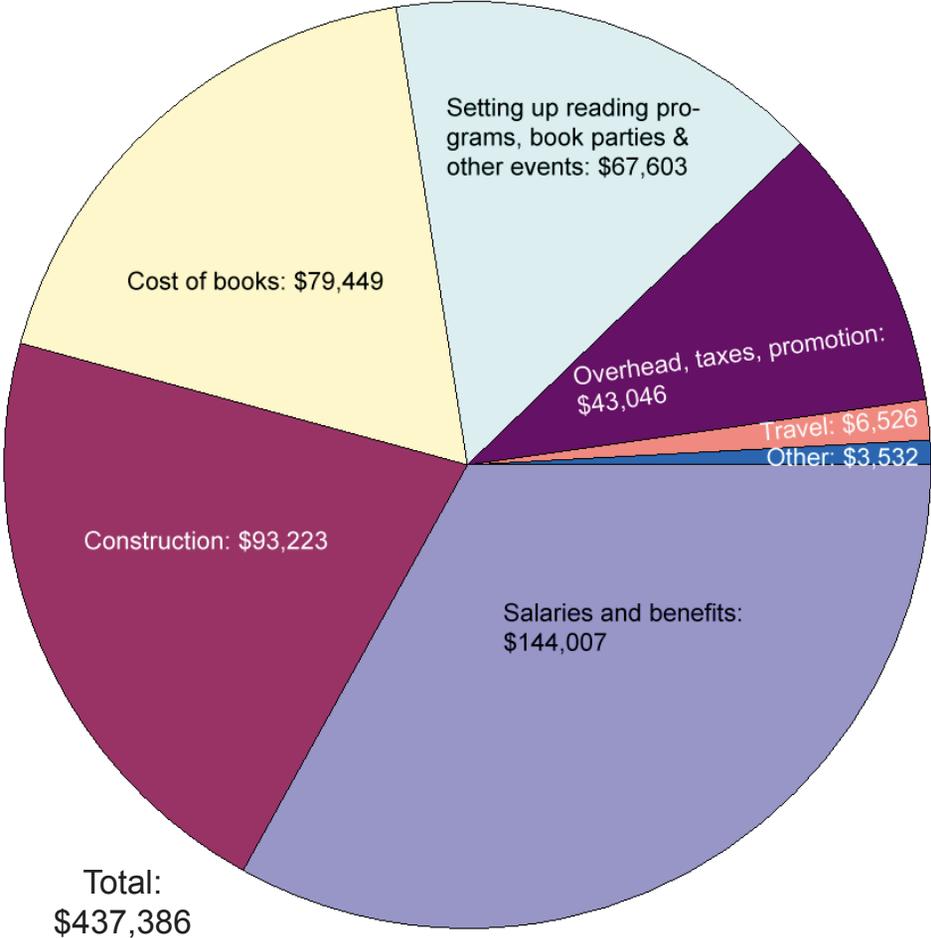
Some key numbers are lower this year, so we'd like to explain why. Our evaluations showed that the reading program required several visits to be sure it was well established, so we went to fewer new schools in 2015, and spent more time on follow-up visits. We expect that as the program becomes more widely known, we can reduce the level of follow-up. For now, our top priority is to see that it's clearly successful in the schools that do it.

Our book output surged for two years because we needed many new short-and-easy books for the reading program. Now that we've got them, we're putting more attention elsewhere. Most notably, Siphone, our primary editor, spent most of 2015 at the construction site and had very little time for editorial work.

How you helped us:



And how we used it:



Notes:

Overhead: Rent for our main shop and office is donated. Sasha Alyson, the full-time adviser, volunteers his time, as do volunteers in other countries. These do not appear as Income or Expenses.

Construction: This is for our new Learning Center; there will be additional expenses for it in 2016.

Travel: This was mostly for the annual staff trip during the summer; it does not include travel to villages for reading programs.

Book parties and other events: This is largely for travel to rural villages; the cost of books and salaries appears in those categories.

Highlights of 2015

During our first seven years, our major focus was to produce more books that “make literacy fun!”

In Sept. 2013 we started something new: Setting up daily reading programs in schools. To get the right mix of titles so that every child could have an appealing choice, every day, we published a large burst of new books in 2013-14: Short (8-32 pages) and easy. Then, with more than 250 titles, we changed our emphasis to evaluating the program, identifying problems, fixing them, and laying the groundwork for it to spread more widely. This didn't lead to the type of “New!!” activities that are most exciting to report, but we think it's what we need to be doing right now.

Evaluation

The first evaluation of our new reading program, in 2013-14, showed that it increased reading skills 26% over students without the program. It also highlighted two problems:

- * Many teachers were slow to implement the program because it was a new idea, they'd never done it before, and they believed their job was to stand at the blackboard and teach.

- * A major stumbling block for students was the “complex vowels” in which two or three vowels combine to create a new sound.

For the 2014-15 year, we addressed these problems, and it made a difference: Students who read every day improved about 39% more than those who did not.

A detailed report on each evaluation can be downloaded from our website. Please click on What We Do, then scroll down to Evaluations.

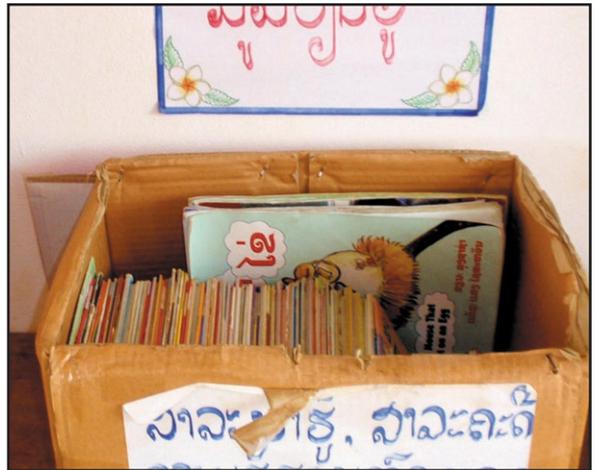
Follow-up visits for Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) Program

If children read every day, will that improve their education and reading skills?

For most people who grew up with books, that question is a no-brainer. For those who attended schools that relied on a teacher and a blackboard, the benefits of reading aren't so obvious. Often teachers agree to implement the SSR program, but don't do it, or do it only on some days.

This year, therefore, we made another change: Returning to schools for further visits, after we set up the program, to be sure it's being done every day, and to discuss any concerns or problems that arose.

We're convinced, from the evaluations and from our own experience, that reading every day will help children become better readers. For local teachers, we expect that seeing it work, and word of mouth from other villages, will count for more than our numbers. Right now, then, our focus is to work hard to get it implemented well, to identify problems, and fix them, even if that means reaching fewer schools in the short run. In the longer term, this should mean that more schools are eager to set up the program, and willing to pay a share of the costs, which will make it easier for us to expand it more widely.



Left: For our evaluations, we used several methods to test reading skills. Here, students read aloud, in turn, for one minute; from that, we calculate how many words the typical student can read.

Right: One question our first year was: How will all those books hold up after being read every day? This set, in one classroom, was typical. The books emphatically showed signs of wear, but weren't falling apart. Some had been mended. Not many were missing. (We tell teachers not to let students take the books home. As much as we'd like to allow that, there is no tradition of libraries or of borrowing books and returning them. Any book that leaves the classroom is unlikely to ever come back.)

Co-Payments from Villages

As the 2014-15 school year opened, we began asking that villages which could afford to do so, pay part of the cost of the reading program. In three of five provinces that we approached, officials agreed that was a good idea. But actual implementation was much slower. Even in villages that could easily afford to pay a share, the usual sentiment was “let’s wait and see what comes our way for free.”

We’ve persisted. We feel this is important, for many reasons:

1. Getting things for free creates an attitude in which villages wait to see what will come for free, rather than being an active participant in deciding what’s best for them and trying to make that happen. That’s not working. As far as we can tell (data is scarce), reading skills in primary schools have gotten worse in the past generation under that system.
2. With more income from more sources, we can reach every school sooner.
3. This is not a hardship for most villages. (Where it is, we continue to do the program free.) At the time of our first book party in 2006, the average annual per-capita income was about US \$400. Now it’s three times that. Most villages have a shop where people buy soap, and also snacks, beer, etc. We estimate that the reading program will cost much less than 5 to 10% of what a typical village spends on snacks, often not even 1%.

We’re making slow but clear progress. We did not actually receive any copayments in 2014, although some were promised. We received \$11,300 in 2015; and in the first 4 months of 2016 we’ve already received another \$9,700.

Learning Center & Discovery World

In terms of both budget and time, a big part of 2015 went to our new Learning Center & Discovery World We'd been planning this for more than two years, but it was delayed because we needed to give full attention to the reading program and evaluations.

April: We held a basi ceremony and broke ground. We're located in Ban Nadaet, about 7 kilometers from the center of Luang Prabang, off the road to Kwangsii Waterfall. Some of you have passed our site without knowing it: We're very close to Tamarind Restaurant's cooking school.



May: Within two months we had the foundations in place. But there was an extra price to pay as construction began, in addition to the obvious one. Siphone, our head editor, had to spend most of his time, for one year, at the work site.

December: The top floor will be open, with lots of light and breeze. This will be an activity area. We expect to eventually use it for various type of performances. Downstairs are three rooms that can easily be closed and locked.



It's not just a building. We have 3 hectares of land, much of it hilly. Eight people spent two weeks clearing a path up one hill, then carving steps. From the top of the steps, you can see rice fields, the Mekong River, and Luang Prabang.

By the end of the year, construction was nearly finished. Plumbing and electricity took a few more months; we'll have a small opening ceremony in May 2016, followed by a bigger opening celebration.



Thank you! to the founding sponsors who made this possible.

What else you helped us do in 2015

I Can Read: Our main activity all year was to set up daily reading programs (Sustained Silent Reading) in primary schools. Our evaluations showed that some teachers had trouble with this new idea, so this year we began making more follow-up visits to each school.



Why is reading important? If you're reading this report, you probably don't need our help to answer that question. But in a culture where books are still rare, their value isn't widely recognized. *Why Reading Is Important* was one of several books we published in 2015 to encourage people to think about the benefits of reading, and how to bring those benefits to their village.

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A book or a sweet? We've begun selling books at festivals and other public events, such as this swimming pool. Having now enjoyed books at school, some children choose to buy books instead of snacks. Not always, but sometimes. Generally, kids have been quicker than adults to want to buy a book.



Co-payments from villages. It's not as exciting as giving kids their first book, but an important part of the year was meeting with district after district, village after village, to explain why we are asking those that can do so, to pay a part of the cost. This is typically the first time they've been encouraged to take a part in deciding what's best for their school. We believe that's just as important as the reading program itself.

Read-a-Thons: For the fourth year in a row, Pauline Carras-Kerr's Grade 2 students at Melbourne Girls Grammar School held a Read-a-Thon to raise money so that we can get books into more Lao schools. Students have held similar fundraisers in England, the USA, New Zealand, Germany, Singapore, Hong Kong, and other countries. Thank you!



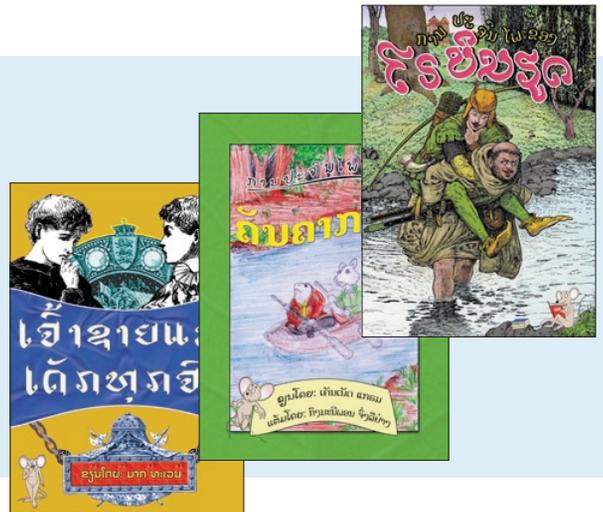
Lunch on the lake: Each year, we take a staff vacation together. In 2015 we chartered a bus and went to northern Thailand. Sonesoulilat, who has organized the book parties ever since we started in 2006 (when he was age 16) expertly plans these trips with a fun mix of temples, natural sights, and offbeat activities, such as lunch on these raft houses.





Cellphone Library: The spread of cellphones has opened up a new way to get books to people, while also providing many distractions. We decided as long as people were looking at their phone, they may as well be reading a book on it. We've made several of our books available, in Lao, in phone-friendly formats; just follow the link from our website.

Classics: We published fewer new titles, but their average size was much bigger. Our list included 3 classics that are popular with young readers worldwide. *The Prince and the Pauper* is an adapted version of Mark Twain's classic, set in a long-ago kingdom The Land of A Thousand Nagas. Hmm... where do you suppose that was? The new titles also include *Robin Hood* and *Wind in the Willows*.



The Cat That Meditated, by Siphone, was one of our very first books. Now we've made it into a video -- with the actors using sign language, so that deaf children who know sign language can understand it, and to give wider visibility to Lao sign language.

ຂອບໃຈຫຼາຍໆ! Thank you!

Big Brother Mouse would like to thank the many individuals, organizations, businesses, and foundations that made it possible for more Lao children than ever before to own their first book.

But words alone cannot do the job. These photos of children as they discover the joy of reading will best convey our feelings. There are many more in the Photo Album section of our website.



\$25,000 and above

Planet Wheeler Foundation

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USA, Cambodia, India

CLSA Chairman's Trust



International Voices Choir

Charles Felsenthal

The Benevity Community Impact
Fund

Agnes Schaller

The Australian Embassy

Molly Bostic and Marc Reiners

\$5,000-\$24,999

The Cubit Family

Peggy Horn

The runners, volunteers, and
sponsors of the 2015 Luang
Prabang Half Marathon

Terre des Hommes (Germany)

Villages of Laos (grouped here as
one entry)



Lyle and Agnes Schaller
Glencoe Family Foundation

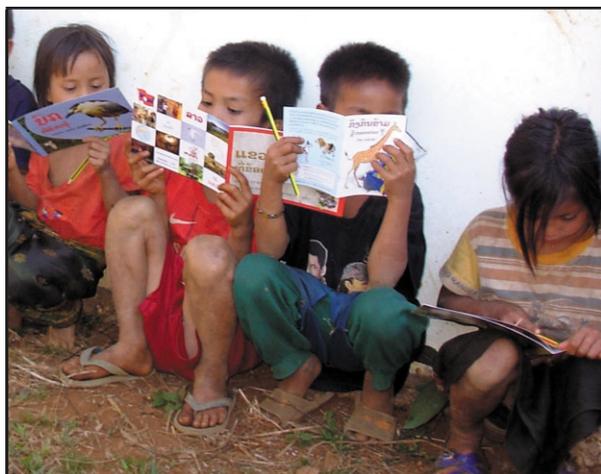
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Yatai Food Cart, Denver, CO, USA

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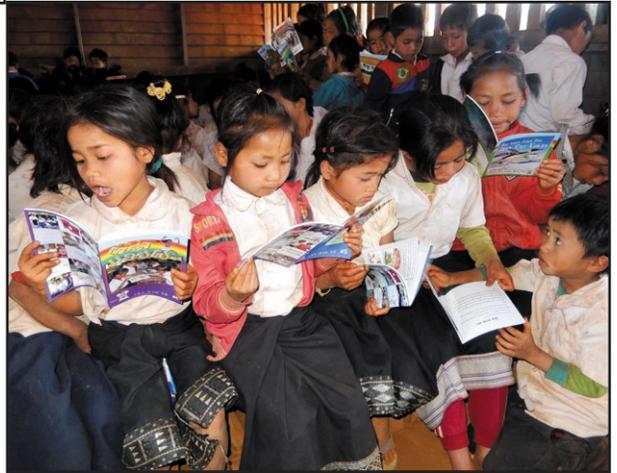
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