

# Cambodia visit opens Ashley's eyes to hard truths

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WORKING with impoverished children has always been Ashley Hetherington's dream — except for the brief period where she thought she would quite like to be a truck driver.

The 17-year-old Coastal Taranaki School student recently came back from a trip to Cambodia, where she was able to see if her dream stood up in reality.

"I want to work in an orphanage or teach in a poor country," Ashley said.

"It's something I've always wanted to do, ever since I can remember, except when I was little I wanted to be a truck driver."

She had never been on a plane before the 13-day trip and went with a group of 16 people she had never met before, but Ashley said the trip solidified her determination to work in a developing country.

"I want the kids to have better lives than what they have, and they can't get anywhere if they don't have an education," she said.

Ashley was sponsored to go on the Cambodia Volunteer & Development Trip, organised by Gecko Tours with Nayland College from Nelson.

Her mother Janine had found out about it on the Internet and when she rang the company was told Ashley could join the school.

The trip included visits to development organisations, time with students at primary and secondary schools, and



Ashley Hetherington (17), of Rahotu, with one of the souvenirs from her life-changing trip to Cambodia.

Photo: MIKE SCOTT

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periods of volunteer work. For Ashley the highlights — or perhaps lowlights — of the trip included going to a rubbish dump where children scavenged through piles of filth to earn a living.

“We got to take one of the kids from the rubbish dump out for the day,” Ashley said.

They took the children to a water park, which Ashley said “was way better than our aquatic centre”, and were allowed to buy them one thing to eat.

“Otherwise they'd be sick, they weren't used to the food,” Ashley said and mimicked the wide eyes of the children who were allowed to choose the single treat.

Seeing how the people lived was something else that has stuck in Ashley's mind.

“It made me feel kind of bad, that we had so much,” she said.

“It was a very big eye-opener. I learnt not to take things for granted.”

Before she went to Cambodia, Ashley said she knew it was a poor country but wasn't aware of the country's political history and the violent Khmer Rouge regime.

“One day we went to a prison where the Khmer Rouge had held prisoners,” Ashley said.

“That was hard, a few of us cried.”

The trip was not only a test to see if her dream was realistic, but also a chance for her to appreciate her life and she said other kids should do it too.

“It would teach everyone a lesson ... everyone would learn something from it ...” Ashley said.

“I've changed a lot, it made me think differently. I'm not going to pack a tantrum because I can't get those wicked shoes.”