

Lifestyle

Award finalists weave local change

Sarah Macklin

SIX inspiring women have been named as finalists for Cambodia's first Indradevi Hope Awards.

"We wanted to honour the extraordinary Cambodian women who are working hard to bring about a positive change in their communities," said Lynn Muller, president of Women's International Group, a non-profit group of more than 20 nationalities who meet regularly in Phnom Penh.

And the awards were a great way to draw attention to the unsung heroines working in the fields of education, health and the empowerment of women, she added.

"The Indradevi awards demonstrate WIG's commitment to community-based projects. This is an inaugural award that we hope will continue on an annual basis."

Each of three winners will be awarded US\$1,500 toward their chosen project during an awards dinner on Saturday, March 12 at the Inter-Continental Hotel.

The Indradevi Hope Awards were named after a remarkable queen – the wife of King Jayavarman VII who established health and education programmes for women, way ahead of her time in the 11th century.

The finalists come from across Cambodia. Touth Koeun used her training in midwifery and nursing, first gained through Médecins sans Frontières in Thai refugee camps during the 1990s, to improve the lives of women and their babies in remote villages in Preah Vihear province.

Since 1995 she has worked with traditional healers and trains midwives to improve ante-natal health and child health across 18 rural clinics through her NGO M'day Rea Reay, Kone Reay (Happy Mother, Happy Baby).

Villagers in Stung Treng province also have another nominee to thank for improved livelihoods. Nguon Chantha's Stung Treng Women's Development Centre has grown from teaching weaving to patients with AIDS and HIV to becoming a UNESCO-awarded silk group producing bags and cloth in Mekong Blue shops in Phnom Penh and online.

Originally trained as a nurse, Nguon Chantha's commitment to reviving crafts has provided employment at fair wages to rural women, along with supplying them with free lunches, kindergartens and schooling for their children.



The Indradevi Hope Awards were designed by Artisans d'Angkor. Behind, award finalist Loem Lida talks about her work in a village near Siem Reap. PHA LINA

Chum Kirivath has also used weaving as a way to help the ethnic Kreung community in remote Rattanakiri province. Giving skills training to young women, she runs her own business designing textile products and is about to open a shop in Siem Reap.

Sophea Oum is another award nominee who provides employment to more than 70 women in a village about 30 kilometres outside Siem Reap, reviving the traditional skills of raising, spinning and dyeing Cambodian golden silk, which is indigenous to the area. She also established an orphanage in Battambang that is still open today, run by one of her former charges.

Young women were also to the forefront of the awards. Young Phnom Penh accountant Houn Sovannary, 25, uses the money she earns from her part-time job teaching Khmer to

fund a makeshift school near the golf course at New City, teaching English every Saturday to eager children. She hopes one day to open her own school on land she has bought.

And teacher Loem Lida is making a difference in her village near Siem Reap. Seeing health problems from piles of rubbish in outlying hamlets, she's organised volunteers for community development to teach English and organise rubbish collection. Her latest inspiration is a community vegetable garden and fish farm to improve nutrition among villagers.

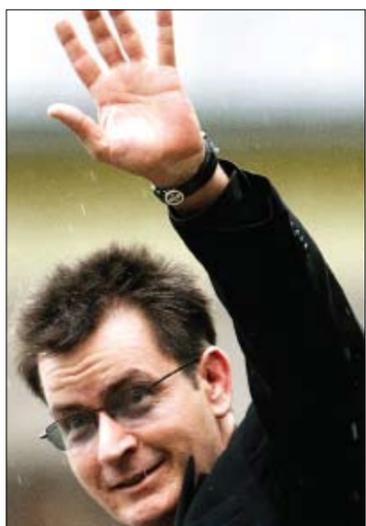
A total of 48 women were nominated for the awards, for which the trophy was designed by Artisans d'Angkor.

Sponsors of the award include ANZ Royal Bank, Cellcard and Lucky Supermarkets.

For more details on the finalists, see Friday's 7Days magazine. ■



From left, finalists Touth Koeun, Chum Kirivath and Houn Sovannary. PHA LINA



An upbeat Charlie Sheen. REUTERS

Why watching Sheen is an unfolding tragedy

Paul Harris

FORGET Lindsay Lohan's skirmishes with the Los Angeles court system. Put Britney Spears's public head-shaving in the history books. Sheen's epic displays of temper, sexual freakiness, marital woes and drug problems beat them all.

Sheen has publicly insulted his own bosses, causing them to cancel his hit TV show, invited reporters into his house to describe his ménage à trois with a porn star and a former nanny, and revealed his past drug use. He seems manic, out of control and to be loving every minute of it.

Given Sheen's self-confessed appetites for illicit substances, there

are some who think the crisis has only one logical end. "He does not seem to care," said pop culture expert and author Richard Laermer. "There is only one way to go when you do what he does and you are in your 40s. Eventually, you die."

Not that most of America seems to care. It loved Sheen as the star of the hit sitcom *Two and a Half Men*, in which he played a womanising but charming cad. The show earned him US\$1.2m an episode and made him the highest-paid TV star in the US.

And now that Sheen has destroyed *Two and a Half Men*, America only seems to adore him more. Last week Sheen's domestic antics,

which included the removal of his children from the house he shares with his two girlfriends "goddesses", were all over the airwaves.

Sheen was the subject of comedy skits, internet parodies and endless watercooler conversations. His talk of having "tiger blood" and "winning" became instant internet hits.

For decades Sheen's partying lifestyle has been an in-joke in Hollywood, but now he is inviting the media and the world to share in it. "Before you could never see behind the curtain. But he's pulled it right back," Laermer said.

Underneath the wall-to-wall coverage there have been rumblings of a

backlash: not so much at Sheen but at the attention paid to a man whom many believe is deeply unwell. Kristina Wandzilak, a Californian drug intervention specialist, complained to ABC: "This is more than a sensational story. This is a tragedy unfolding on a national stage."

Sheen's life may resemble a bizarre piece of performance art, but real people are involved – his children. A few have pointed out Sheen's record of violence against women, which spans 20 years and includes the 1990 accidental shooting of Kelly Preston, then his fiancée, several guilty pleas for assault and various restraining orders. THE GUARDIAN ■