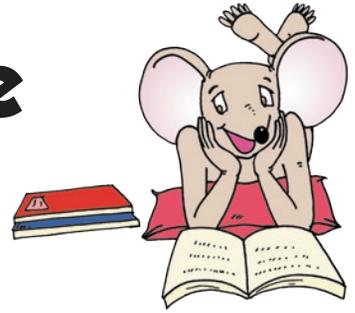


Big Brother Mouse

Annual Report, 2014



Greetings from Laos!

New activities are fun to do, and exciting to announce. But sometimes what make a difference is to keep doing largely the same things, with incremental improvements. In 2014 we did some new activities, but our major focus was to keep making our books and reading program better and more effective. That's described in the pages that follow.

On this page, I'd like to highlight something that was new, but not very photogenic. We completed an evaluation of our reading program. As you may know, rigorous evaluation of a program's impact is all too rare. We not only did it; we announced details in advance (so that we couldn't just slip the results under the floorboards if they weren't good), and we published a 20-page report of the evaluation results.

The evaluation found that our daily reading program did improve reading skills: By 26% in schools that used it, compared with those that did not. It also highlighted problems of implementation, and suggested ways to make the program even more beneficial.

As for photogenic: Here's my daughter Visaka, who will soon turn 4. Ever since she was born, my wife Kham and I have read books to her. More than a year ago she started looking at books by herself. Here she's looking at "The Crow Has Eyes," #1 in our "I Can Read!" series. She's not reading it, and we're not pushing her to read, but she has fun looking at the pictures. As each letter is introduced, there are four pictures of things that start with that letter, and she enjoys identifying them.

Thanks to you, many more children in Laos will grow up loving books.

Thank you!
—*Khamla Panyasouk, Director*

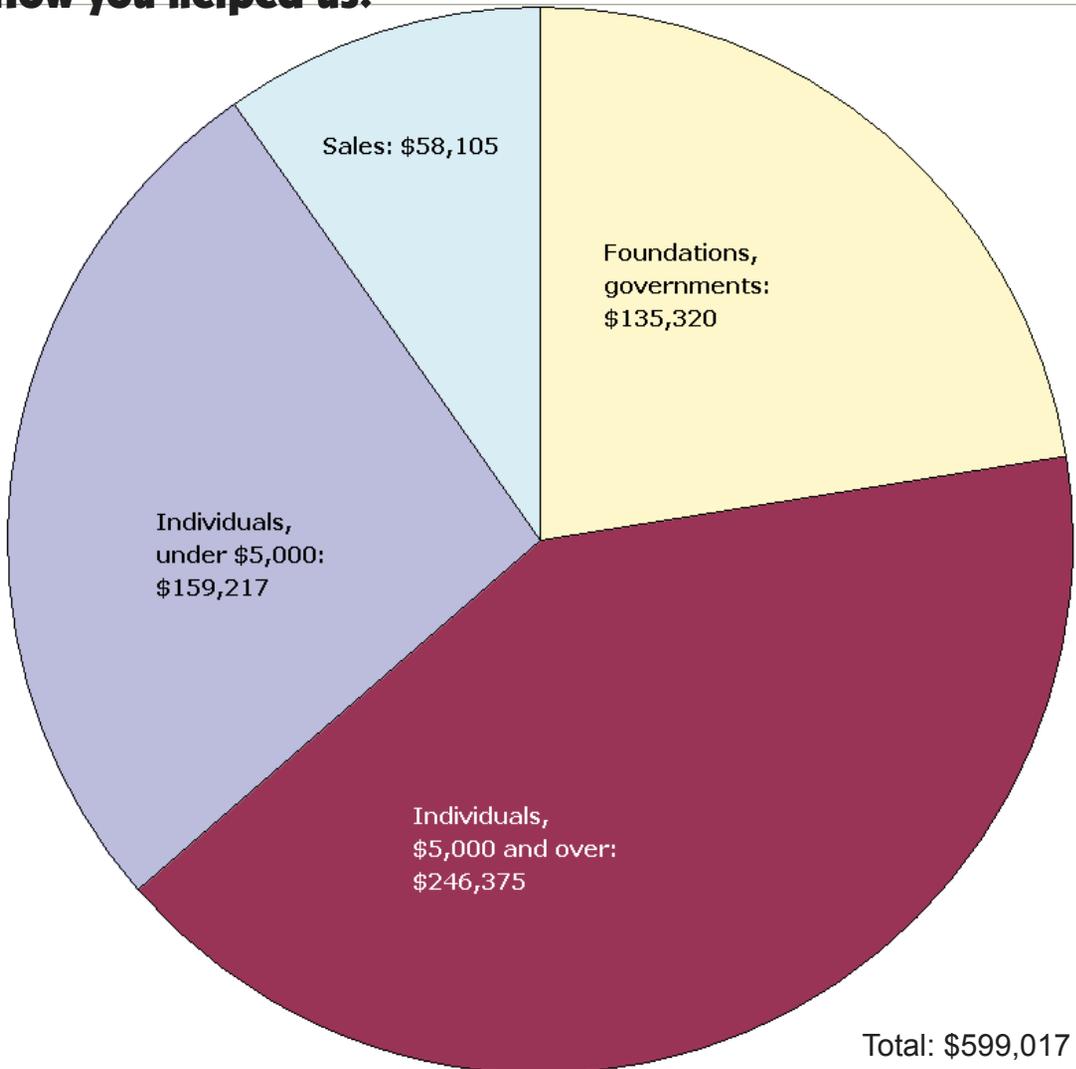


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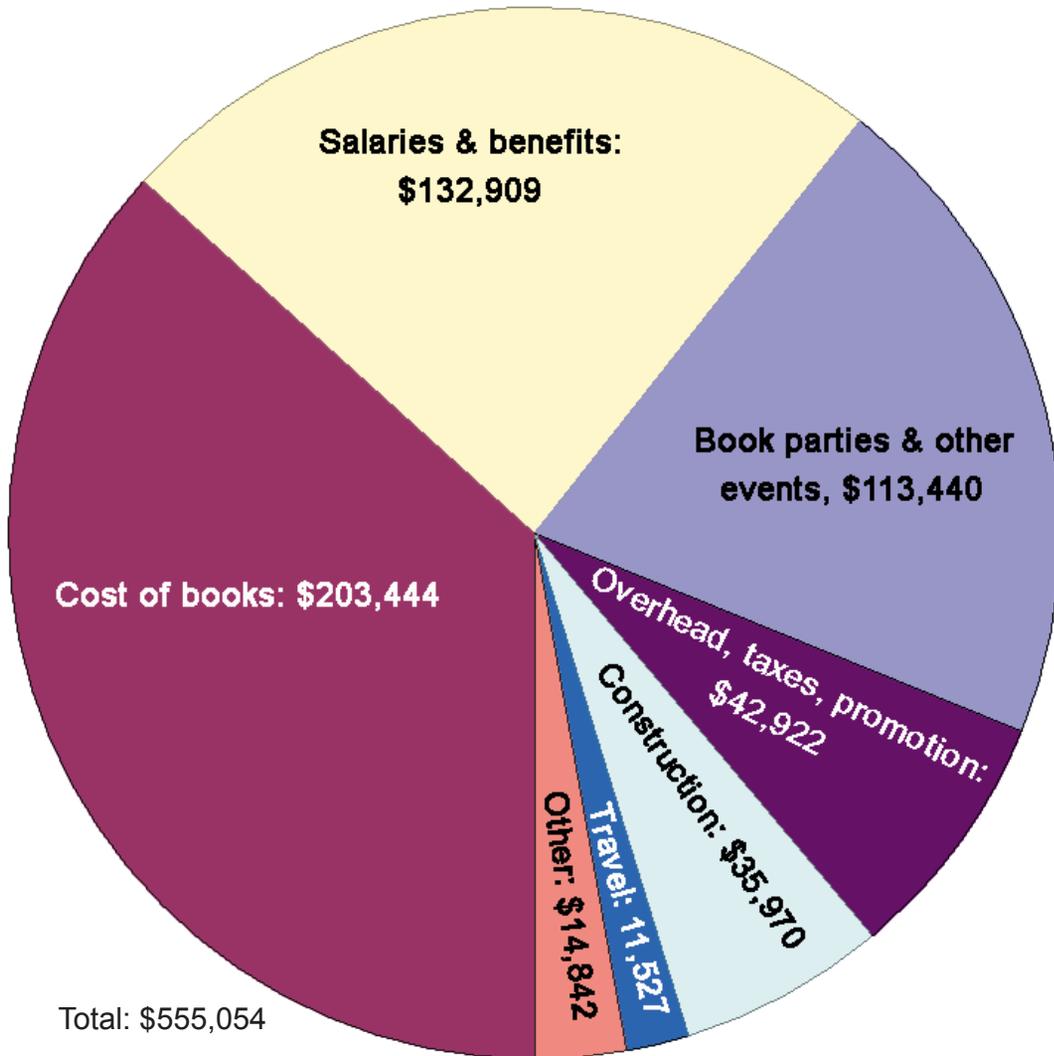
How BBM has grown

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Book parties, no reading program (2006-May 2013)	510	544	903	357	—
Reading program (with book party; starting Sept. 2013)				404	754
Books donated (1,000)	134	178	270	301	419
New titles published	30	40	25	88	54
Titles reprinted	4	9	35	18	29
Cumulative numbers:					
Total titles published	134	174	199	287	341

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 in Expenses.

Construction: Some of this represents final costs on the staff housing that we built in 2013; some is for land clearance for the new Learning Center.

Travel: This was largely for the annual staff trip during the summer.

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 2014

Our first books appeared in 2006. For seven years, our major focus was to produce more books that people were eager to read. We also began developing and experimenting with distribution methods, but our primary goal was to make more high-quality books.

In 2013 that changed. We began setting up daily reading programs in schools, providing books to every classroom. We also created a system for evaluating the impact of this program.

In 2014, we got some surprises from the evaluation. We refined the reading program, and made two important changes: We created a series of books to teach reading skills; and we began asking villages to co-pay for the program at their school.

Evaluation results

Our evaluation yielded a surprise: Students didn't read as well as we'd been told they did. Often we'd been told that "second grade students can read a word, but not a sentence." In fact, in the 40 schools we tested, less than 25% of students entering third-grade could even read a word.

The evaluation also helped us identify a major stumbling block: The complex vowels. Lao is largely phonetic: each letter corresponds to just one sound. However, two or three vowels may combine to create a new sound. Many children got stuck at this point.

After we compared schools that got the reading program with those that did not, we found that despite haphazard implementation (see below), students with the program increased their reading skills 26% more than those without it. That's good, but we think it can be even higher. (A detailed report can be downloaded from our website. Please click on What We Do, then scroll down to Evaluations.)

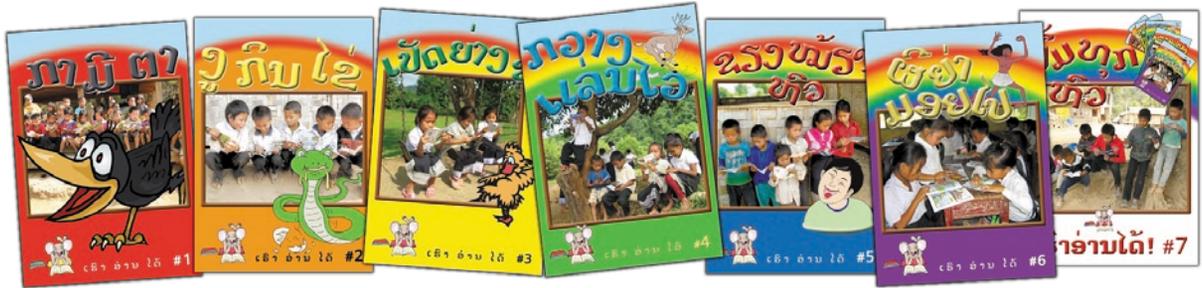
Changes in Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) Program

For the SSR program, teachers agreed to allow 10-15 minutes a day for students to read a book of their choice. We left 50-70 books in each classroom, suitable for that grade level.

Three months later we held workshops for these schools. We found that in many cases, teachers weren't providing the reading time, despite having agreed to do so.

There were several factors at work but largely this was a simple matter of habit, and reluctance to do something new. These teachers grew up in schools where education meant a teacher and a blackboard. That was how they themselves had always taught. (A majority of these schools had zero books that students could read for enjoyment, before Big Brother Mouse came.) They genuinely didn't see how reading books would help children learn; they believed they should be at the blackboard, teaching the alphabet.

With support from education officials, we got most of them to start providing the reading time, but by then we had lost nearly half of the year. In 2014-15, we added several measures to improve implementation: More frequent follow-up, stronger directives from the Department of Education to allow reading time; and giving teachers books that they themselves would be eager to enjoy during the reading period.



“I Can Read!” Series

Despite their attachment to the blackboard, some teachers at these workshops also expressed a need for materials to help them teach. At the end of January we began work on a 7-book series called “I Can Read!” These books teach the letters one by one, with colorful cartoons to help students practice what they’ve learned. The rainbow-colored series was ready when schools opened in September.

To supplement them, we also created three or four books at each of the seven levels, which students can read just for enjoyment, to get more practice before they learn more.

The road to sustainability: Co-Payments from Villages

At our request, Planet Wheeler gave us a special grant for 2014, to be used only as a matching grant when schools or villages paid part of the cost of the reading program.

We had many reasons for wanting to ask villages to pay a share of the cost:

1. It changes the dynamics when, instead of being the passive recipient, a village has to think about “is this something we want, enough to pay for it?”
2. With more income from more sources, we can reach every school sooner.
3. Laos is developing. 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. Our best guesstimate is that the reading program will cost less than 5 to 10% of what a typical village spends on snacks.
4. Free things create dependency. They create an attitude of taking what’s free, rather than deciding what’s best, and working to make it happen.

We proposed this to education officials in five provinces, and in three provinces they firmly agreed that it was a good idea. (A fourth was too busy with a sports festival to consider it; a fifth preferred to see what they could get for free.) On the local level, there was more resistance. Even in villages that could easily afford to pay a share, the usual sentiment as “let’s wait and see if we can get free help.” Clearly this will be a gradual process but after a critical mass of villages participate and see results, we expect it to get easier.

What you helped us do in 2014

Taking books to rural villages: We still hold book parties, as we've done since 2006. But now they simply mark the beginning of the Sustained Silent Reading program, in which we leave books in every classroom, so students can read every day. Sometimes getting there was half the fun. This village didn't have a bridge, but did have a local entrepreneur with a truck.



I Can Read: Two boys picked a book about dinosaurs. It's part of our "I Can Read" series, which introduces one letter at a time. The book is called "Animals of the Past" because "dinosaur" (as well as a lot of other words) uses letters they haven't yet learned.

Six tons of books: We made our first trips to southern Laos this year, going to two of the country's poorest provinces: Attapeu and Xekong. It's a two-day drive, so we rented an extra big truck and took all the books in one trip.





Discovery World & Learning Center:

Although we didn't begin construction until 2015, we cleared the land in 2014. Siphone did his best, but eventually persuaded us to get help.

Sign Language: Suliphone joined us as a staff artist. He is deaf, and when we hold book parties nearby he often goes and does a sign language lesson. We've identified many deaf children in rural villages, often with no way to learn any language, and we're investigating ways to teach sign language to them and their classmates.

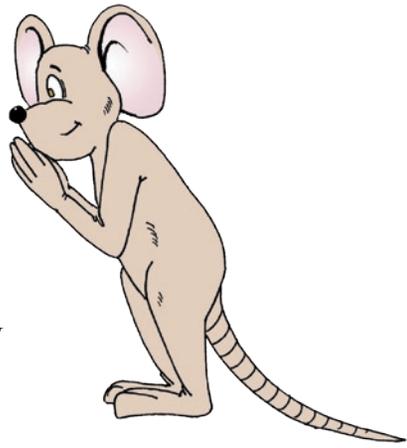


China! Most of our youthful staff has seen very little of the world; an annual staff vacations gives them a chance for new experiences. They were excited when Sone explained what an escalator is, and that they might have an opportunity to ride one during our bus trip to China. In fact, they got quite a bit more excitement...



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

Bory and Manoj Paul

CLSA Trust

The Cubit Family



Ray Faulkner

Steve Kupetz

Tricia Sharpe and Ray Barker

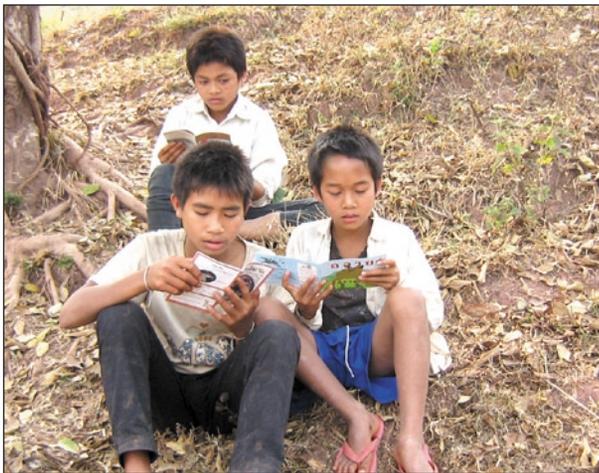
Charles Felsenthal

Colin Cotterill and Books for Laos

Brian & Gerry Warren

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Bruce Schaller



\$5,000-\$24,999

Laos Literacy Project

GNS Ceramics Pty Ltd.

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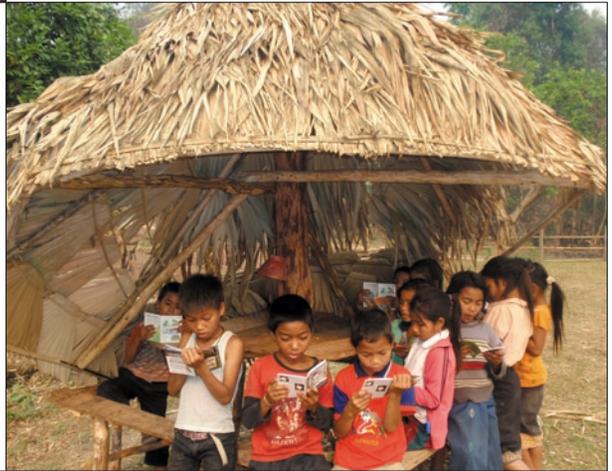
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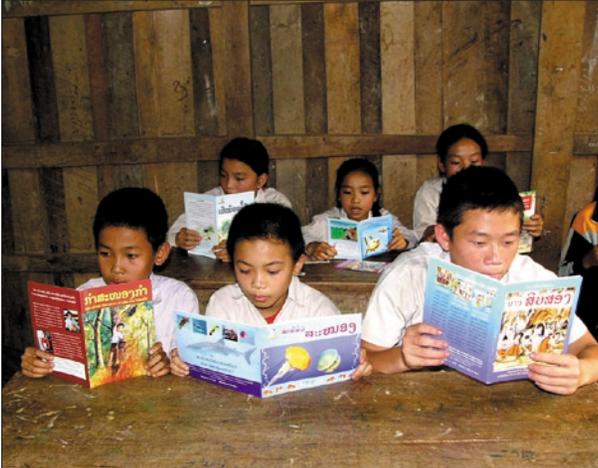
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