



*Always Ready  
Always There*

# The Gem State Guardian

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**Guardian**  
**Online Staff**  
Maj. Gen. Gary Saylor  
Commanding General  
Maj. Chris Borders  
Public Affairs Officer  
Editor

## SHOES FOR CAMBODIA

Story by Lt. Col. Heidi Munro, Idaho  
Army National Guard



Staff Sgt. Kelsey Vanderwiel smiles as she watches Cambodian military personnel putting on new running shoes.

Several years ago I met a brilliant Cambodian physician at a conference in Thailand. Her name is Nary Le. She was Cambodian born during the Khmer Rouge, orphaned, and adopted by a French couple. She grew up in France, was highly educated, did her graduate work at the Pasteur Institute in HIV studies, and is a world expert in Avian Flu and infectious disease.

At some point, she felt a need to “give back” to her birth country, and moved back to Cambodia, where she now works for the U.S. government at a Navy lab.

Somewhere during her interactions with Americans, she was encouraged to run a 10k marathon. She had never run before, but did it for fun. And won. Then she did another and another and another and kept winning.

She realized she had a talent and started running with the Cambodian

National Running team. She was horrified to find they were mostly running in street shoes and sandals because they couldn’t afford running shoes. One of their star runners, Hem Bunting, qualified for the Olympics at one point, but couldn’t go because he didn’t have shoes or a uniform. An article on BBC led to a donation so he ran.

Fast forward years later, this team is still ill-equipped and never has enough shoes. Even if they could afford to order them, online for instance, the postal service could never guarantee the shoes would ever arrive. As she was telling me this story, she told me the only way they could really get shoes was for foreigners to bring them.

I told my daughter this story in 2014 and she started a “Shoes for Cambodia” campaign at Timberline High School. That year a group of Idaho Guard members personally carried over about a hundred pair of really nice running shoes. Many of the shoes were donated by a couple local Idaho running shoe vendors.

After the national team received theirs, we gave the rest to the Cambodian Armed Forces during Angkor Sentinel, and it was like Christmas!!!

We gave the shoes out on one of the last days during a sports event. Upon completion of the exercise, the General in charge had one

request: that the soldier’s “get their shoes” at the beginning of the exercise



Hem Bunting proudly displays his new shoes

next year.

Last year, Timberline collected over 300 pair of shoes, and again, it wasn’t enough, but the effort was extremely appreciated. This year, the tradition continues, and so far, Timberline has about 150 pair of shoes.

I encourage you to look for Shoes for Cambodia on Facebook, a page our very own Staff Sgt. Bethany Stanley started during last year’s project.

I also encourage you to read Hem Bunting’s story at <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/sport/hem-bunting-ly-nary-step-their-training> and look up Nary Ly. She will be running the marathon for Cambodia in this summer’s Olympics!

Visit the Idaho National Guard online at <http://nationalguard.idaho.gov/> or call the Idaho National Guard Public Affairs Office at 208.422.5268