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Every year, the World Leprosy Day provides the opportunity to remind people that once treated, the disease is no longer contagious. So, on 24 January 2018, CIOMAL teams organized a celebration at the Kien Khleang Rehabilitation Center (KKLRC) in Phnom Penh. Over 60 former patients came from all over the country to dance and sing. Here are their testimonies.

Lan Ol, from Sotsikom, Siem Reap province

Lan Ol no longer has a nose. Ashamed of his condition, he has always kept to himself, away from others, and speaks only rarely. A father of three, he was abruptly devastated by multibacillary leprosy in 2015. His whole family then turned their backs on him. Disfigured and eaten away by the disease, he found himself homeless. His only possession was a tiny boat that became his house, hidden in the bushes on the Tonle Sap lake. "The monks from the pagoda would bring me some food, sometimes money. One day, a bread seller alerted the Red Cross, who then referred me to the village chief. He called CIOMAL and that's how I ended up at the KKLRC center where I received treatment." On 24 January 2018, Lan Ol, who is still being treated at KKLRC, joined the festivities. Dragged by his fellow patients, he ended up dancing the whole afternoon. "Here, I feel like I'm part of a big family. Nobody is judging me. I never thought I would ever find an environment like this."

Van and Choeun, from Prey Veng province

Van and Choeun are both affected by leprosy. In 2015, while he was at KKLRC center to receive treatment for an ulcer, Van noticed Choeun, who was also a patient there. Enthralled by the young woman's beauty, he could not take his eyes off her. "I hadn't realized at all," Choeun claims in a laughter. She had just left a violent husband. One week later, Van, who was now healed, had to leave. But he managed to secure the phone number of his sweetheart and started calling her to whisper sweet words. Choeun was surprised at first but she was soon won over. "He came to wait for me when I left the hospital and I went to live with him in Prey Veng. Life isn't easy every day. We have to look after our pigs, cows and chicken but we love and help each other." The two lovers never stopped dancing during the festivities.

Seun Kai, student in Pouk, Siem Reap province

"I was 15 years old when I found out I had leprosy. For me, this word meant rejection, exclusion and shame. My whole world fell apart. I wanted to die. I was brought to KKLRC center to receive treatment and that's

where I discovered a new world I had no idea existed until then. All those people had no hands or feet, sometimes no faces, and yet, they seemed to be full of courage! Personally, I had an insensitive dragging leg, so I could consider myself lucky in comparison. That's when I decided to pull myself together."

Thanks to a CIOMAL scholarship, Seun Kai was able to continue her studies but she had to face rejection from the other students at her school as well. During a visit two years ago, CIOMAL workers decided to hold an awareness campaign at the school. Her peers thanks to the intervention of her teachers have since accepted the young girl. "I want to become a teacher. I want to share my story and fight the stigma [of leprosy]." With her beautiful voice, Seun Kai is often asked to sing at weddings. On 24 January, she joined the band. "This day is very important for people with leprosy. Back home, they don't dare dancing like this because they're afraid to be rejected."



Lan Ol, from Sotsikom



Van and Choeun from Prey Veng



Seun Kai, student in Pouk



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