



COMING OUT IN THE KINGDOM

Beautiful Life Organisation provides direct support to people with diverse SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, sexual characteristics), primarily through their drop-in centre, A Place to be Yourself (APTBY). Samnang* was 18 years old when she first visited APTBY; she was in grade 11.

Samnang's first visit to APTBY was in January 2022. She had joined one of BLO's community yoga sessions and met Lyhuor, one of the APTBY facilitators, there. She said that Lyhuor was very friendly and invited her to BLO's boxing event the following month. Not long after, APTBY put out a call for volunteers and Samnang was one of the first to sign up.



One of BLO's community yoga sessions

“I wanted to learn more about APTBY and gender, and meet friendly people... I felt safe because I knew APTBY supported LGBTIQ+ people.”

Samnang volunteered for a couple of months and was a regular attendee of BLO's different community events, including boxing, bootcamp, yoga, and discussion groups. She would often pose questions to APTBY staff about how to best respond to bullying and discrimination. It later became known that she was actively defending an LGBTIQ+ peer at school, who was being bullied by their classmates and teacher alike.

“I couldn't do much, because it was just 2 of us against a lot of people, but I tried to make him feel better and not so alone. I told him, 'Don't be scared, I will be there with you.'”

Samnang brought her friend to visit APTBY, thinking he would benefit from the resources, information and peer support we provide. He was shy at first, but quickly became a regular visitor – hanging out, chatting with other visitors, or just sitting quietly and doing his homework.

*name has been changed to protect the identity of visitor

On coming out

Samnang grew up part of a Siem Reap-based organisation that supports families and education. As such, she has a large “NGO family” (with more than 100 members), as well as her biological family.

“One night at dinner, someone was joking about wanting to see me have a girlfriend. I think they suspected I was LGBTIQ+ from the clothes I had always worn, my actions and my hobbies. I felt like I couldn’t control myself – I couldn’t keep it in any longer. I told them, ‘Guys, I already have a girlfriend.’ They were all so excited for me!”

Samnang came out again the following night to different members of her extended family. She cried this time, out of both fear and relief. Her family were very happy and supportive, taking her to a local gay bar to watch a drag show to celebrate.



APTBY staff providing basic tutoring for some of our highschool student visitors

“I had never seen anything like that. I was so happy I cried some more!”

Of her biological family, Samnang says that her younger sister told her mum after overhearing a conversation between her and her friend. Samnang was upset because she had wanted it to come from her own mouth; however, her mum said, “It’s ok – it’s not wrong – you can love who you want to love – your feelings are natural.”

“I couldn’t say anything. I just gave her a big smile. I want to cry now just thinking about it.”

Samnang attributes her newfound confidence and feelings of safety in large part to the support she has received from APTBY.

“I don’t need to hide anymore, and I’m so glad. When I have to keep it inside, it hurts.”

