

Inspired by film of Jesus being crucified

Vanna Pom grew up in a rural village in Cambodia, and had never even heard of Jesus. But a movie she saw changed her life

IMAGINE you know nothing about Jesus, but you see footage of an innocent man being brutally executed.

That's what happened to Vanna Pom, who was moved to tears by the suffering of a historic figure she had never heard about. But it led to her embracing the Christian faith. Now she's part of the congregation at St Luke's Church in Southsea.

Vanna grew up in a rural village in Cambodia called Takeo. Her parents had lived through the genocide by the Khmer Rouge regime which came at the end of the country's civil war in the 1970s.

In her village, only one family owned a TV. To see the outside world, villagers had to crowd into that family's front room and watch together. On one such occasion, Vanna saw a movie depicting the life of Jesus.

"It was about a man being tortured by soldiers and being left to die on a cross," she said. "I remember crying about it, but I didn't know who it was and neither did my mother. We had grown up as Buddhists, so we knew nothing of this story."

A year later, she moved to Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia, to learn English, which is vital to get a good job in that country. She stayed with her



Vanna Pom at St Luke's Church, Southsea

uncle, who sent her to study at a private school. She felt she wasn't learning English fast enough.

'I can't imagine life without God. I can't work without him in my life now'

Two girls in her class suggested going to church, where she could study English and also learn about God. She started to attend worship as well as Bible study classes.

"The teacher at church showed me a movie about Jesus, and it

was the same one I'd seen in my village," she said. "It was heart-breaking. I realised his name was Jesus and I wanted to find out more about God."

Six months later she was baptised in her church. She went to tell her parents what had happened, and they were alarmed. Their only experience of other faiths involved people moving away and ostracising their families, so they worried that she was joining a cult.

"My mother started to cry, and was worrying about what I'd done," she said. "I'm the oldest of her children, so have a lot of responsibility, and she was

concerned. I explained about God's love and tried to comfort them. After a few months of loving and caring for them, they realised that this was different, and that it wouldn't take me away from them.

"My mum allowed me to read the Bible to her, which was very special. I have a Bible in English and one in Cambodian that the pastor bought for me when I was baptised. I use it every day."

Vanna met her husband Benjamin at the school where she was working, and they got married in 2009. Ben is from the UK, so they were interested in settling in England, but you're not allowed to migrate directly from Cambodia to the UK. They had to spend a year living in China before applying to come to England.

"Ben could have gone back to the UK by himself, but he didn't want to leave me," she said. "So we spent a year in China which was very different. To go to church, you had to travel for 2 or 3 hours into Beijing and then show your passport to be let into the church."

They came to England in 2014, and moved in with Ben's parents in Chessington initially. They struggled to find a local church that was welcoming enough while they were there.

"My church in Cambodia was massive, and international, and very welcoming," said Vanna. "We went to a Baptist church nearby, but we didn't feel at home."

A year later, they bought a house in Portsmouth, and Vanna found a job working in a nursery in North End. She has always enjoyed working with children, and is now studying for a foundation degree in early childhood at Portsmouth University. She'd ultimately like to become a teacher.



Villagers in Takeo, Cambodia, with food bought with the sponsorship money

Help for those hit by Covid in Cambodian village

WHEN the Covid pandemic hit Cambodia, the effect on rural villages such as the one Vanna grew up in was immense.

The biggest wave there started in February 2021. Families were going hungry, villagers couldn't work as factories were closed, and the food markets were shut to try to halt the spread of the virus.

With no vaccinations initially available, all that infected people could do was isolate themselves from the rest of the village. Vanna was especially worried as she could no longer return to see her family. Millions of Cambodians have now been given vaccinations, and the country is recovering well.

"My sister is still there, and working for the government, so she was sharing about how Covid had affected people," said Vanna.

"She asked if we could support them. I was praying about the problem, and realised that being sponsored to run was one way to help. It could raise money to buy food to help families there.

"Family is very important to me, and God answered my prayers because we found a way to help them."

Vanna set up a fundraising page and then was sponsored to run a half-marathon for the first time along Southsea Promenade last summer. She has already raised almost £1,500 as a result, which has been used to buy rice, fish, noodles and other essential food.

If you would like to contribute, do visit: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/food-support-for-families-in-tako-cambodia>

"Church is a big part of my life, so when we came to Portsmouth, I wanted to find a church," she said. "I was desperately looking for a family church and saw St Luke's online.

"I went to the gate and saw that the main door seemed to be shut. I thought 'I don't want to go', but we did go in and the church family there is absolutely

amazing. The vicar, Annie, is very encouraging, helping me and praying for me if I am in trouble. We join in with Night Prayer online most evenings. I've been involved with welcoming other people, and I have helped with the children as well.

"I can't imagine my life without God now. I can't work without God in my life."