

# Justus' Journey from California to Cambodia

Justus with EGBOK participant

For as long as Ben Justus can remember, volunteering was a part of his life and he largely credits this to the line of Jewish women in his family. His grandmother and mother worked hard to instill in him at a young age the importance of service and giving, largely leading by example. But this legacy is by no means reserved entirely for the women in his family. He also has vivid memories of visiting the temple in Munster, Indiana – it is on a street that is named after his great-grandfather in honor of his dedication to the Jewish community and for helping those in need.

The apple doesn't fall far from this family tree. Only 27, Justus now lives in the Southeast Asian country of Cambodia where he founded and runs a non-profit organization, EGBOK, that lifts dozens of youth out of poverty every year. The need there is great; 30% of the population lives on less than 45 cents a day.

Growing up in San Diego, Justus began volunteering at a Jewish retirement home at the age of 11 and continued volunteering there until he left to attend Cornell University. There, he studied Hospitality Management at Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. After graduation, he didn't follow the typical path of his fellow graduates. He felt he needed to use his passion for the hospitality industry to help those less fortunate and he looked hard to find a path to follow.

After spending time in Cambodia while still a student at Cornell, Justus immediately felt a deep personal connection to the local communities. He struggled with the fact that Cambodia suffered a horrific genocide in the 1970's when over 20% of the country was murdered. This genocide resonated close to home for him as he draws parallels between the Cambodians and how the Jewish community suffered during the Holocaust. Both communities, devastated and

demoralized by genocide, have been rebuilding for decades although the scars from what they endured are very much still present.

"The Jewish community and now the Cambodian community too hold special places in my heart and are proof of how resilient the human spirit is when one endures such tragedy. I simply couldn't ignore this powerful connection. I am compelled to help the Cambodian people."

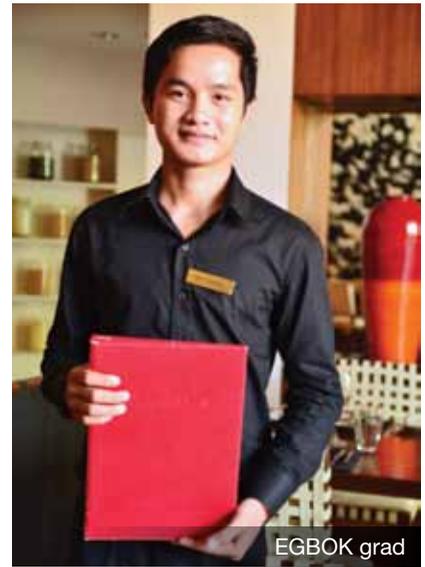
For Justus, the path was the creation of EGBOK, an organization that alleviates poverty by empowering underprivileged young adults in Cambodia with the educational and vocational training needed to support themselves as hospitality professionals, with an emphasis on life skills development. "EGBOK" was a saying of his grandfather's that stands for "Everything's Gonna Be OK". Justus couldn't think of a better name and a better way to mark the



Justus teaching participants



EGBOK Mission grads



EGBOK grad



EGBOK grad

EGBOK Mission works with community partners that include orphanages, community centers and public schools. It provides students with a foundation course that incorporates hospitality theory, English language development, critical thinking and professional skills while also building confidence.

For students who want to embark on a hospitality career upon completion of the foundation course, EGBOK provides the resources and support needed to enroll and succeed in an intense, year-long training program in hospitality. Students live in EGBOK Mission Living Centers.

EGBOK then works closely with the students to secure and prepare them for their first job in the hospitality industry, while training them in skills needed to replicate the job search process independently. As they move out of the Living Centers and begin their careers, EGBOK continues to provide social support to its former students through mentoring and supplementary courses to allow a smooth transition into social independence, financial stability and self-sustainability.

To learn more about EGBOK Mission visit [www.egbokmission.org](http://www.egbokmission.org) or contact Ben Justus at [benjustus@egbokmission.org](mailto:benjustus@egbokmission.org).

connection between his family's values and his mission.

The organizational mantra "providing service through service" represents the act of serving, while enabling others to do the same through hospitality. The students his organization trains learn to embody these qualities that Justus ties so closely to the values of his Jewish upbringing: providing service for and caring for others. And on a purely practical level, hospitality provides greater financial returns. While the national average annual income in Cambodia is \$615, EGBOK Mission alumni have an average base salary of

\$1,092 (or \$1,668 including tips). This is a tremendous step in breaking the cycle of poverty for many.

More than anything, Justus wants to share the message that one person can make a difference anywhere- it doesn't require a move around the world. There is opportunity for individuals to give back at home too. It is about putting the skills you have acquired academically and professionally to use to help others.

"You do the work and you don't question it," Justus humbly states. But it is more than what he does. It is who he is. ✎