



Claire Coxon, of Newport, is pictured with a photo of Cambodian children she has helped support through the Green Gecko Project. Picture: Alex Russell

Cambodia close to Claire's heart

Yvonne Mawbey

NEWPORT'S Claire Coxon returned to Cambodia yesterday (April 23) on a year-long mission to help street kids.

She gave up her job last year as a world computer specialist to help children and their families set up micro-businesses in the tourist area of Siem Reap.

She went there in November, when the Cambodian government made begging illegal.

"Street children and their families, who made their living by begging, are now forced to resort to alternative methods like using drugs and human trafficking to survive," she said.

Miss Coxon is a volunteer with

the Green Gecko Project, set up by fellow-Australian, Tania Farmer, to help Cambodian street kids gain an education.

"We have about 50 children aged from five to 16, who come to Green Gecko," she said. "All of them are homeless, and they are the main breadwinners for their families."

"Many of their parents are addicted to drugs, alcohol or gambling, and many parents are uneducated."

"The children are sent out to beg because they have better English, and they tend to get more money out of the tourists who come to visit the Angkor Wat temples, which are at Siem Reap."

"I have helped the children and their families set up second-hand book stalls, fruit stalls, and micro-

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businesses selling specially-printed postcards and baskets.

"As a condition of taking part in the program, the parents have to agree to allow their children to go to school by day, and to have the children to feed by about 9pm."

"Previously the children often went up until 2am or 3am, and the last experiences had startled her. But our program allows them to have regular hours and a chance of an education."

Parents work the family stalls by day, and the children receive lessons from 9pm until 9pm.

Miss Coxon said it is often "a struggle" to continue the commitment by the parents, who are used to having their children working, and who don't see any benefit in education.

She said it is essential that the businesses return a steady income to families, so that they will continue to allow their children to attend school.

Before going to Cambodia, Miss Coxon was retail marketing an online site for STA Travel.

The company operates the STA Travel Trust, which provides advice and money to help individuals and groups "explore the issues of peace, tolerance, justice and equality".

The trust granted Miss Coxon help to allow her to work as a Green Gecko volunteer in Siem Reap for a year.

In order to do so she had to step down from her position with the company.

"When I come home I'll be looking for a new job, which is a bit daunting," she said.

"But, managing these micro-enterprises, I am gaining some great experience, and I'm getting a lot out of the program myself."