

HOME NEWS OLYMPIAN TRACY EVANS LOOKS TO EXPAND CHARITY TO CAMBODIA

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Olympian Tracy Evans Looks To Expand Charity To Cambodia



Olympic swimmer Kim Vandenberg visits with Cambodian children during a Kids Play International volunteer trip in October 2013.

Tracy Evans just returned from a trip to Cambodia, and she admitted she still is fighting jet lag.

It wasn't just the 28-hour trip (complete with a layover in Seoul) that she was feeling, but the nonstop schedule she immediately dived into when she arrived back in Los Angeles, including a speaking engagement.

Five days after getting back to the United States, she might have been exhausted, but she was hardly off balance. Just as during her athletic career, the three-time Olympian and U.S. champion freestyle aerial skier had landed on her feet and was ready to take off.

Evans, 45, was upbeat and excited to talk about her time in Cambodia that she believes will open doors for her non-profit organization, Kids Play International, to begin operations there some time in 2015.

"We checked it out and met and did activities with kids in rural schools and went to some community centers that were more city-oriented," she said. "We went up to an orphanage in the north and down south to Phnom Penh as well ... just met with a variety of organizations we could potentially partner with."

Evans was accompanied by two other Olympian volunteers, swimmer Kim Vandenberg and water polo player Jaime Komer. They explored the country, did their youth sports outreach work and looked for communities where KPI can make a difference.

“We’re very excited,” Evans said.

It’s a big next step for KPI, which Evans founded in 2008 with the mission of using sports as a catalyst to promote gender equity in regions impacted by genocide. Until now, all of KPI’s work has been in the African nation of Rwanda, where the effects of atrocities perpetrated during the 1990s civil war are still being felt. Rwanda will remain KPI’s focus for the time being, but communities in Cambodia — also with a recent history of genocide — will be next up, beginning with volunteer trips in 2014 ahead of establishing community programs in 2015.

Evans doesn’t want to spread KPI’s scope before the time is right.

“I’m just really particular about not moving too fast, and making sure that we’ve got a really well-rounded, impactful program in Rwanda that, when we have all our ducks in a row, we can easily implement to a number of different other areas in Rwanda and other countries as well,” she said.

The core of KPI’s efforts is its Let’s Play Fair program, which began in 2011 in the Rwandan village of Gatagara. More than 100 boys and girls are regular participants in the program, with hundreds more also involved. Let’s Play Fair uses sports to teach values such as respect, gender equity, good sportsmanship, teamwork and problem solving.

Over the past 18 months, Evans said that KPI has made big strides, hiring its first in-country, year-round program director, who oversees and trains the program’s coaches.

Along the way, Evans has been able to get the help of Olympians to visit Rwanda and help in Let’s Play Fair: Vandenberg, Komer, freestyle skier Emily Cook, beach volleyball player April Ross, luge sliders Erin Hamlin and Cameron Myler, gymnast Chellsie Memmel, soccer player Angela Hucles and hockey player Chanda Gunn, as well as pro soccer player Anne Poulin.

Currently, each of KPI’s athlete ambassadors is involved in a [Crowdrise campaign](#) through Dec. 2 to each raise at least \$1,000 toward a goal of \$10,000 to build a better, safer and more centrally located sports field in Gatagara.

Evans said Olympians have eagerly volunteered their time. In fact, she said, KPI’s values mirror Olympic values — excellence, friendship and fair play — and they teach those values to the children.

“They (values) are so near and dear to me,” Evans said. “I learned so much from them in my own Olympic career that it just makes sense to also be promoting those same values in a program that is using sports to promote gender equity.”



L-R: Olympians Tracy Evans (freestyle skier) and Jaime Komer (water polo) with a child in Cambodia during a Kids Play International volunteer trip in October 2013.



Kids Play International (KPI) Founder Tracy Evans teaches volleyball skills to children in Cambodia during a volunteer trip in October 2013.



L-R: Olympians Jaime Komer (water polo) and Kim Vandenberg (swimming) lead stretching exercises for children in Cambodia during a Kids Play International volunteer trip in October 2013.

Gender equity is an emphasis because Evans believes that giving girls opportunities to compete, learn and interact with boys — earning their respect and friendship — can create enormous positive ripple effects.

“The boys really play a meaningful role in this process,” Evans said. “In order to be truly successful in reaching gender equality, you can’t cut out half, the other gender. You have to include them so they understand why and how everyone can benefit by empowering women and girls.”

Much of the Let’s Play Fair curriculum, in fact, includes joint boy-girl leadership.

“So it just gets to be what they’re used to,” Evans said.

Evans, who retired from Olympic competition after the Salt Lake 2002 Olympic Winter Games, said KPI has taken up more and more of her time since its launch, but it’s going to be a lifelong project. Her charitable effort, along with the work she does for her company, Athlete Source Casting — which pairs athletes with films, TV and advertising projects — keeps her constantly busy.

But Evans, who lives in Park City, Utah, still makes time for exercise, whether it’s skiing, snowshoeing, mountain biking or hiking.

“For me, exercise is absolutely something that keeps my mind clear and keeps me happy,” she said.

With the Winter Games beginning less than 100 days from now in Sochi, Russia, in February, Evans knows she will still feel the competitive urge to compete — “That’s always a part of me,” she said — but she’ll be happy sitting on her couch, watching on TV and cheering on U.S. athletes.

Plus, her focus is on the future, not the past.

“Just to be given the platform as an Olympic athlete to be able to give back to those less fortunate, who just don’t have the opportunities or the choices that we as Americans have in this country ... it has impacted me,” she said.

Doug Williams covered three Olympic Games for two Southern California newspapers and was the Olympic editor for the San Diego Union-Tribune. He has written for [TeamUSA.org](http://www.teamusa.org) since 2011 as a freelance contributor on behalf of Red Line Editorial, Inc.