

## Cambodian children's choir travels far with hope

By [William Loeffler](#), TRIBUNE-REVIEW  
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### About the writer

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To the members of the Cambodian Christian Children's Choir, America has three rivers, a submarine and a lot of people who wear black and gold. Their pastor, Sinai Phouek, tried to shrug off his jet lag as his young charges clambered aboard the U.S.S. Requin at the Carnegie Science Center on a bright and sticky Thursday morning. The 21-member choir makes its American debut at 11 a.m. Saturday at the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium.

"This is really amazing for them to come such a long way," Phouek says.

He could well have been talking about the country itself. The group of Cambodian orphans, aged 8 to 20, are at least a generation removed from the communist genocide of the Khmer Rouge, who murdered 2 million people from 1975-79. The children, plucked from poverty on the streets, are products of a country whose medical and educational systems are still in shambles and where HIV and child prostitution are rampant. Doctors and teachers in Cambodia were among the first to be murdered by the Khmer Rouge.

The choir hopes to promote Cambodian culture and causes on their six-week "New Hope" tour. It came about thanks to a Christian partnership that stretches from Oakmont to the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.

In 1991, Mark and Eleanor Geppert founded South East Asia Prayer Center, a nonprofit evangelical Christian aid organization, in Oakmont. They operate in 16 countries and regions, including Thailand, Laos and Tibet. They met Phouek during one of their missionary trips to Cambodia. Phouek founded New Hope for Orphans, which now operates seven orphanages in Cambodia. The two joined forces to rescue, feed and educate Cambodia's children. Most of the children lost one or both parents to HIV. Some were abandoned by a widowed mother or father when that parent remarried.

Phouek and his wife, Somalay, are Khmer Rouge survivors. Thursday, Phouek pointed to a scar on his cheek, where he says a bullet grazed him during a Khmer Rouge massacre. He survived by playing dead, he says.

His 11-year-old daughter, Rebecca, has dark almond eyes and a coltish energy. She wears a Steelers cap but says she likes WWE Wrestling. She's the only member of the choir who is not an orphan.

Asked what she would like people to know about Cambodia, she says, "What we eat, what our traditions are. The Khmer Rouge, they killed a lot of people."

The South East Asia Prayer Center raised the \$60,000 necessary to bring them to America, Mark Geppert says.

"There's not any real financial motive in what we're doing. It's more of an awareness and to give the kids this opportunity. They come from one of the poorest countries on earth."

Choir member Pitou Chan, 19, was abandoned by his father after his mother died. He and his sister, who is deaf and mute, lived on the streets and foraged in garbage dumps before being rescued by New Hope.

"It's like a new world," he says. "When I was young, I wanted to go to the United States."

The children tour the Pittsburgh Children's Museum today and visit Kennywood Park on Monday.

Bob Roth, owner of Roth Automotive in Oakmont, raises money for the South East Asia Prayer Center by restoring and selling automobiles. He also collects and sells donated scrap metal, including refrigerators, stoves, washers and dryers.

Roth, who has conducted 30 missionary trips to Cambodia, Mexico and Guatemala, estimates he has raised about \$15,000 for the South East Asia Prayer Center.

"I've just grown close to the Cambodians, such a genuine loving, caring people.

"The lord has kind of led me to this group. It's something that sometimes you can't explain. You just know that that's where you need to be."

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