

HEROES

Friday, September 07, 2007

TRAITORS? (ZEROS)

## Orphans of war-torn Cambodia sing of new hope

September 07, 2007

By **MELANIE STAWICKI AZAM**

Staff Writer

***Daytona Beach News Journal*** (Daytona, Florida,  
USA)

NEW SMYRNA BEACH -- Many of the children lost their parents to AIDS. Others lost relatives to decades of warfare that left their country in ruins.

But the Cambodian orphans who sang and performed traditional dances Thursday at Atlantic Center for the Arts, moving gracefully across stage in brightly colored native dress, brought a message of new hope, reflected in their smiling faces and confident gestures.

"It's my culture -- everyone in Cambodia needs to carry the culture in their hearts," said Pitou, who, like the other orphans, goes only by his first name. He is a 19-year-old who has been at his orphanage since 1999. "I want to build my culture up, not down."

The young man is one of 20 orphans, ranging

**វីរជន**  
**ស្នេហាជាតិ**

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**英雄**  
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in age from 8 to 22, who make up The Cambodian Christian Children's Choir. This is the orphans' first visit to the United States, and their "New Hope" tour started in Pittsburgh on Aug. 14 and wraps up Sept. 22 in California.

The children come from seven orphanages, which are run by New Hope For Orphans, a group founded by Cambodian couple the Rev. Phouek Sinai and his wife, Somalay. The Prayer Center, a faith-based nonprofit located in Oakmont, Pa., has partnered with New Hope on numerous humanitarian projects, including the choir and its tour.

"The theme of the 'New Hope' tour is from the killing fields of Cambodia and all that death and horror -- there's a generation that is the hope for that nation," said Mark Geppert, director of the Prayer Center.

"We want to make people aware of the culture," Sinai said.

The choir's Central Florida performances and lodging are being coordinated by New Smyrna Beach residents Everett and Sandy Foss. Everett Foss is on the board of the Prayer Center and he and his wife have done humanitarian work with the organization throughout Asia.

Christ Community Church in New Smyrna Beach is helping host the choir, whose members will stay at a rented home in New Smyrna and perform at New Smyrna Middle School next week.

"We've got a beach party planned for them and a couple of people from our church have dinner parties planned for them," Everett Foss said.

Last summer, the Fosses visited Cambodia, meeting the orphans and experiencing firsthand the country's struggles to recover and provide its children a better future. The retired couple said Cambodia still faces

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By **Gene Sharp**

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plenty of challenges, such as high unemployment, poverty and a lack of electricity and schools.

But the roughly 200 orphans at New Hope also embody the optimism Cambodians have for their country, Sandy Foss said, because the youngsters are "being schooled, taken care of (and) becoming the leaders for tomorrow."

Geppert said the Cambodian government has set a moratorium on foreign adoption of its orphans and set a nationwide goal to revive the country by educating its young people.

"So they become the national leaders in this new generation," he said.

Sitha, 20, said conditions are improving in his country "step by step." He said he's hopeful that Cambodia's economy will grow to provide jobs for its overwhelmingly young population because "a lot of the students are hopeless because it's hard to find jobs after school."

The Sinais recounted how they both lost family after Cambodia was taken over by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Somalay said she even witnessed the killing of her father. Both of them fled and eventually met in a refugee camp in Thailand. They both became Christians and returned to Cambodia in the 1990s to start their first orphanage.

"I want to build a young generation for the nation of Cambodia, because a lot of people died in the past," Phouek Sinai said.

In partnership with New Hope For Orphans, the Prayer Center is now helping to set up 25 model schools throughout Cambodia, Geppert said. The first school is already up and running, serving more than 1,800 students in grades K-11, he said.

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## Did You Know?

The true story of the friendship between a New York Times reporter and his Cambodian interpreter is the basis of the 1984 film "The Killing Fields."

- Based on an article written by Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Sydney Schanberg, the movie starred Sam Waterston as Schanberg and a Cambodian doctor, Haing S. Ngor, in his film debut, as friend and interpreter Dith Pran.
- The movie tells the story of how Dith Pran is left behind when his American friends are evacuated after the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975 and endures the atrocities of the Pol Pot regime. He survives to be reunited with Schanberg in 1979.
- Ngor received the Best Supporting Oscar for his role in the film and went on to act in other movies and television shows.
- Ngor, who witnessed the starvation and death of his family, was shot to death in Los Angeles in 1996.

Compiled by News Researcher Peggy Ellis from [filmsite.org](#); [imdb.com](#)

## War-Torn History

- 1863: Cambodia becomes a protectorate of France.
- 1953: Cambodia wins its independence. Under King Sihanouk, it becomes the Kingdom of Cambodia.
- 1965: Sihanouk, by now head of state, allows North Vietnam to set up bases in Cambodia during the Vietnamese conflict with the U.S.
- 1969: The U.S. begins to secretly bomb the military bases.
- 1970: The prime minister, General Lon Nol, assumes power and proclaims the Khmer Republic. Sihanouk, in exile in China, forms a guerrilla movement, the



Sithi.org - Human Rights Portal



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communist Khmer Rouge guerrillas.

- 1975: The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, overthrows Lon Nol. At least 1.7 million people die during the next three years due to torture, starvation, disease or hardships.
- 1979: The Vietnamese capture Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia. Retreating to Thailand, Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge wage a guerrilla war.
- 1991: A peace agreement is signed in Paris.
- 1993: A three-party coalition is formed. Sihanouk becomes king again and the country is renamed the Kingdom of Cambodia.
- 2004: King Sihanouk abdicates and is succeeded by his son Norodom Sihamoni.

SOURCES: news.bbc.co.uk/, state.gov  
 Compiled by News Researcher Helen Morey.

**More Music**

The Cambodian Christian Children's Choir will perform at these other Central Florida venues:

- 2:30 p.m. today at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex.
- 4-8 p.m. Saturday at the East Coast Cruisers Car Show on Canal Street in New Smyrna Beach.
- 8:30 and 10:30 a.m. Sunday at Christ Community Church, 1210 Mission Drive, New Smyrna Beach.
- 7 p.m. Wednesday at International Christian Centre, 101 Indigo Drive, Daytona Beach.



Posted by Socheata | [Permalink](#) |

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**1 comments:**

[dave longstreth](#) said...

These are my friends, I just returned from Cambodia and worked with these children before they came to the US and then they spent two more weeks with us in Pittsburgh! Thanks for putting them in your blog- they really are the new hope for Cambodia, a brighter future!

2:12 AM

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