

Cambodian orphans on tour to spread a message of hope

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By Ann Rodgers, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

Cambodian students dance on stage yesterday at Kennywood.

It was raining at Kennywood, but the young dancers glowed with joy as they presented a traditional Cambodian celebration of the rice harvest -- and then changed from silken tunics to T-shirts for a hip-hop hymn.

"We have traveled a long way from Cambodia, just to tell you that Jesus loves you and wants to bring hope to America too!" shouted Somalay -- who uses one name -- wife of the pastor who oversees these 20 orphans.

Now 46, she was made an orphan under the genocide of Pol Pot. She works with a Christian charity in Oakmont, the South East Asia Prayer Center. At the invitation of the Cambodian government, the center is working to reform Cambodian schools, which the Khmer Rouge eradicated in the 1970s. The center, which is outspokenly Christian, does extensive social projects in Asia, such as partnering with Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh to provide life-saving heart surgery for children in Tibet.

The monthlong New Hope Tour of the United States includes 20 orphans between the ages of 7 and 22, plus the daughter of the Rev. Sinai and Somalay, and five Cambodian adults. Their goal is to enlist more sponsors for orphans at \$30 per month. It also raises the profile of their schools project.

At Kennywood, two of the older boys wanted to ride a roller coaster -- an unimaginable novelty. They rejected tamer coasters and insisted on the largest, the Phantom's Revenge.

With the courage born from a nation of survivors, they climbed in. Other Cambodians tracked their car as it shot down the hair-raising track. They emerged laughing.

Piseth, 20, was orphaned at 12 and is about to graduate from high school -- a great accomplishment in Cambodia. He plans to study information technology, but has loftier goals.

"I want to serve God as a missionary," he said. "God has had mercy on me in my life."

That is Somalay's story also. The center's founder, Mark Geppert, had begun visiting Cambodia to pray for its needs in 1994, which led to a partnership with her husband, the Rev. Sinai.

"Pastor Mark supported my vision for a younger generation in Cambodia," the Rev. Sinai said. "We want to raise these young people to be the future leaders."

The center's seven New Hope orphanages care for 205 children, most of whom lost their parents to AIDS. Somalay believes God chose her for this.

She was 12 when the Khmer Rouge began slaughtering everyone with any education, perhaps 3 million people. She saw her father murdered, and then fled into the jungle, where she ate leaves and avoided land mines. She believes it was Jesus who prevented her from killing herself, even though she did not know his name then.

"I love all of these kids because Jesus brings me love," she said. "He chose me to work with orphans. He brought me to such a low level so I could experience how they feel when they have no parents, no food, no clothes.

"I thank him that he created me a Cambodian. I want all the people of Cambodia to have a real hope. I forgive all the people who killed my dad in front of me."

In 2004 the Rev. Sinai arranged a meeting with a government minister, so Mr. Geppert could pitch a plan to bring something like the Boy Scouts to the public schools.

The minister, IM Sethy, secretary of education for sports and education, had been a physics teacher before Pol Pot. The soldier who was to have broken his neck struck too low, knocking him into a mass grave. That night he crawled out and fled into the jungle. His life is consumed by the desire to educate Cambodia's youth.

He responded to the pitch for scouting in public schools with, "This would be really great, but we don't have any schools," Mr. Geppert recalled.

He learned that just one-tenth of 1 percent of the population has completed sixth grade. Mr. Geppert, who has other large projects in Asia, offered to establish model schools and create teachers' and vocational colleges that could grow into universities. In return, he received permission to teach Christianity, although Cambodia is officially Buddhist.

From Pittsburgh and Singapore he recruited experts in education, construction and international troubleshooting. In Cambodia it costs \$60,000 to build a school for 2,000 children, said Ken Martin, the center's chief financial officer. The goal is to raise \$15 million for 25 schools.

Now, there is just one of the center's model schools in Cambodia. The public school has 1,861 students in pre-K-12 and will graduate its first seniors in 2008. The South East Asia Prayer Center provided teacher training and supplemented their salaries to eliminate teacher absenteeism.

Ninety-five percent of its students pass exams for promotion to the next grade.

The students are given preparation to start small businesses, particularly in clean diesel and solar power generation.

With the help of anonymous companies in Pittsburgh and Ohio, the center has nearly completed the first college in rural Cambodia, he said.

"The land where we dug to put the college is full of bones" from the genocide, he said. "Thousands died there. But we believe that out of this graveyard, a generation is being raised up that is new hope for Cambodia."

This weekend, the New Hope Tour will perform at Christ the King Church, Upper St. Clair; the SouthSide Works and Northway Christian Community in Pine. They will then tour the U.S. before returning to Cambodia next month. For details see www.seapc.us/cambodia or call 412-826-9063.

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