The Sharing Foundation Newsletter

www.sharingfoundation.org

CARING FOR CAMBODIA'S CHILDREN

SUMMER 2021

Honoring the Death of a Loved One in Cambodia

Lee Steppacher

We are all saddened by the recent death of Elephant's mother, Pen Sem. And we are so grateful to her for giving birth and raising Elephant! She lived a full life. She was a farmer and lived in Northeast Cambodia where she raised 3 children. She survived the years of the Khmer Rouge, though one of her sons did not. After the war, she migrated to Phnom Penh with her husband, Elephant and his sister. She did not work, though her husband was a cyclo driver (tricycle for transport) and Elephant was too, before he met Nancy Hendrie and TSF! After her husband died and she began to have health issues, Elephant moved her into his home so he could care for her. She was living with Elephant and his wife in Phnom Penh when she died and he organized and hosted the funeral rituals for her.

Beliefs and practices for caring for the dead are different in Cambodia than in much of the U.S. and we thought this would be a good opportunity to explore these differences. These rituals are important in Cambodia and reflect Buddhist ideas and cultural beliefs of life as well as life after death. Central to Buddhism is the belief that death is not the end of life but is part of a cycle; it is a transition from one life to rebirth into another one. Many of the practices reflect this belief.

Pen Sem died at home, and Elephant and his family cared for her body there. They washed, cleaned and clothed her, laying her in a coffin with flowers so she could remain at home for 2 days. Traditionally the time at home is 3 days, but due to Covid it was shortened. The body was not embalmed or

> **"...there are many differences in how Cambodians and Americans view death and afterlife, although rituals that show respect, care, and love are common between us.**

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RCC Students at Beltei International School

Deborah Nelson

TSF has the good fortune to be able to send 36 of our residents of the RCC to the private Beltei International School, where the education is widely considered to be better than that at Cambodian public schools. The tuition is reasonable and we are grateful that our donors have been willing to support the extra expenditure to assist our children to be able to learn in a better environment.

The front of the Beltei campus in Phnom Penh

Founded in 2002, and with 22 campuses, the motto of all the Beltei schools is Quality, Efficiency, Excellence, Morality, and Virtue. Elephant tells us that all the campuses are of the same quality. Our children attend just one of the 22 campuses spread throughout the city of Phnom Penh, and their building looks similar to all the others: much like a high rise apartment building of up to 9 stories. The Beltei website states that each school has installed "Modern teaching equipment in each classroom according to its level and grade such as LCD Projectors, TV Program, Listening Labs, Internet, Laboratories, slogans, sayings, proverbs, and formulated posters; every classroom has air-conditioners and is equipped with cameras to observe students' study activities and teachers teaching performances." Classes are limited to 30–40 students.

Over the years, TSF Board visitors have had the good fortune to receive guided tours of our particular Beltei campus, often with the head of school personally conducting

A group of engaged students in one of Beltei's modern classrooms

the tour. In my May 2019 visit, I was most impressed with the bright well-ventilated classrooms replete with learning posters on the walls, the engaged teachers, the clean lavatories, the well-stocked libraries, and perhaps most of all, the sophisticated science laboratories with lab benches, safety posters

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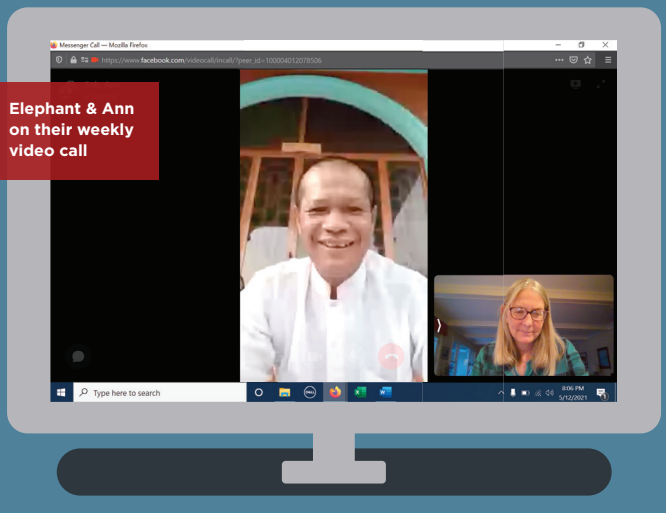
Running a Cambodian Nonprofit from the US

How do you run a non-profit organization in Cambodia when you live in the northeastern US? Phnom Penh is a 24-hour flight away, and Cambodians speak a different language and have different cultural values. Moreover, what laws surround our programs? None of this stopped Nancy Hendrie from starting The Sharing Foundation in 1998, and it hasn't stopped us today, even though we can't travel to Cambodia due to the pandemic.

To remain successful, it's most important to have trusted staff. Developing and maintaining trust can be difficult due to miscommunication and differing management styles. For example, our TSF staff rarely say "No" to any Board request, but that doesn't mean the request will get done. In Cambodia, business dealings are typically non-confrontational whereas in the US we tend to be straightforward. Cambodians also believe in top-down management. If I want something done or answered for the Board, I must go directly to Elephant, which isn't my preferred approach—I'm more comfortable with delegation. Yet Elephant is the key to our current success. He is resourceful and tolerant of different styles, embracing those that can help TSF grow.

It is just as important for Elephant to trust us as it is for us to trust him, which is where our weekly calls come in handy. Thanks to modern technology, I can talk to Elephant whenever needed. After many years, we chose Facebook Messenger for our weekly video call, just like a Zoom meeting. I have a prepared agenda and he has his week's worth of concerns to discuss. Since we are both at our homes during these conversations—8 PM for me and 7 AM for him—we often get to greet each others' family members. I can get quick answers throughout the week using Messenger as well.

Besides these weekly meetings, Elephant gathers reports from staff covering all our programs each month, 17 total, including Medical Care, English Program, RCC Help School, Farm Labor, Farm School, University, and others. We also get reports by email, as needed, for children's grades, vaccinations, field trips, etc. Each member of the Board has an area of responsibility—they read their relevant reports in detail and note important changes or questions.



Elephant & Ann on their weekly video call

During Covid, we have also used technology to stay in touch with the kids as best we can. We still collect sponsorship letters and send them via apps like Dropbox. Return letters and pictures are also collected and distributed electronically. While this might sound more efficient, there is a lot of scanning and file naming involved, but at least we are able to keep up the communication between our kids and their sponsors.

In addition, we have used Zoom to see and talk to our staff and kids on occasion, and have included TSF friends at times. We held a graduation, a high school sponsor meeting and a visit to the Children's Center with the only drawback the 13-hour time difference. This change, courtesy of Covid, will likely stay as it has enhanced our connections between the two countries and communities.

While this approach to managing TSF's operation in Cambodia has worked well during Covid, we cannot wait to start our oversight trips again. First to travel will be our Pediatrician consultant, Dr. Sandra Meyerson. She is anxious to see the kids in person. It is hard to believe that the malnourished baby we took in during February of 2020 is now one and half years old and walking!

We are grateful that all our RCC children that are old enough, all our staff except one, and all our university students have been vaccinated with the Chinese vaccine, Sinopharm. Elephant has pulled off a miracle getting this done—it is clearly "who you know" in Cambodia. When more of the country's citizens have been vaccinated and we are certain we cannot pose a threat, we will start our oversight visits again.

In the meantime, Roteang, and much of the surrounding area, is still in lockdown yet most of our programs continue to operate. Beyond the normal complement of RCC kids, the RCC is housing our children who cannot live at the vocational school, university or the School for the Blind while both the English Program and university are being taught remotely. Kampong Speu orphanage continues to receive our support as do the remote villages we help out. The farm is still producing and kids still need books wherever they are. So thank you for your continued support. Because of you, the people we touch through our programs are doing well during this crisis.

Honoring the Death of a Loved One in Cambodia

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dissected because this might interfere with future rebirth. In the evenings local monks came to Elephant's home to chant as a way to calm Pen Sem's spirit and to protect her from any bad spirits as she prepared for new life. The spirit is thought to be confused just after death and the monk's chanting is reassuring to the spirit.

Buddhists believe that there are significant milestones in the transition from leaving one's body and being reborn. The spirit is vulnerable in this transition period so effort is made to protect it during this time. While these are traditional Buddhist beliefs, Elephant also said that he would ensure that no cats jumped over the body as a jumping cat might scare the transitioning spirit.

After 2 days, Elephant led a procession to the temple for a funeral service and cremation. He invited many monks to participate. The more monks that are involved, the more assured Pen Sem is of a good rebirth. Subsequently, the body was cremated and ashes were placed in a stupa on the grounds of a temple. It is thought that cremation allows the spirit to move more easily into its next stage of existence before it transitions to a rebirth. And placing remains in a temple ensures that the spirit is close to Buddha to speed the reincarnation process.

While the color of mourning in the U.S. is black, in Cambodia, and for many Buddhists, it is customary to wear white. Sometimes white flags are flown outside the home where someone has died.

As a part of the mourning process, family members will frequently shave their heads out of respect for their loved one. Just as some people in the U.S. will wear black for an extended period (or used to) this is an outward display that the family is in mourning. Elephant also did this to show respect for his mother.

After the death there are many significant milestones in Buddhist belief; 7 days after death, 49 days, and 100 days. Each milestone signifies a part of the transition of the spirit towards its rebirth.

Cambodians honor their ancestors in ways that are not common in the U.S. Most Cambodians, including Elephant, have a spirit house on their property or in a corner of their house. Hotels and retail stores also frequently have a spirit house. There is a spirit house at the RCC as well. These may be very simple, small wooden houses or quite ornate replicas of a temple mounted on a post. Families place offerings of food and incense in the spirit house to show respect to ancestors and those that have recently died. Some also believe that these offerings also keep evil spirits from entering the home.

As part of traditional Cambodian culture, Elephant shaved his head and wore white clothing to mourn his mother's death.

A traditional Cambodian Spirit House

There is an annual holiday, Pchum Ben, lasting 2 weeks in the fall, in which families visit the temples to make offerings to their ancestors. Traditional beliefs are that some spirits might be unable to reincarnate and can visit the world of the living during this period. They may seek relatives or meditate with hopes of building karma. Living family will bring food to the temples to offer the dead and pray for their reincarnation. It is a time for families to be together and honor their ancestors. Most businesses and schools are closed throughout this period (We at TSF make sure not to travel to Cambodia at this time because it is difficult to work when most Khmers are with family).

Elephant has a saying, 'Same, same but different'. The sentiment applies to so many things when we talk about our respective cultures. In this instance, there are many differences in how Cambodians and Americans view death and afterlife, although rituals that show respect, care, and love are common between us. TSF

Young Adult Cambodian-American Adoptee Group

Vanny Nelson, Katharine Payson and Alex MacDonald, three young adults adopted from Cambodia into American families approximately twenty years ago, are organizing an adoptee group open to any young adult Cambodian-American adoptee (regardless of their adoption agency). The group's goal is to build connections and hopefully friendships among participants.

Now in the initial planning stage, the three founders are hoping other Cambodian-American adoptees will join them—to help develop the group's structure, identify the activities the group will pursue and move the group forward.

If you (or someone you know) is interested in getting involved or learning more, please reach out to Vanny (**vannyn01@icloud.com**), Katharine (**katharinepayson@gmail.com**), or Alex (**alexmacdonald4190@gmail.com**).

NOTEWORTHY

Great News!

- **All** our RCC staff &
- **About 1/3** of the children and young adults have been vaccinated!

Only kids 18 and older are currently eligibile to be vaccinated in Cambodia.

Currently **all** our RCC, High School and University students are sponsored.

Thank you for making this happen!

Our children take computer classes weekly!

They have learned not only how to use Photoshop, but are learning Excel and PowerPoint too!

More photos can be found on our website and Facebook page.

The English Language School, operating intermittently for the last 16 months, resumed in May for online classes.

Our dedicated teachers made this happen! It takes perseverance on the part of both the teachers and students.

Bumpy Bus Fund

The Bumpy Bus Fund has raised **$11,030** to date!
A new bus costs approximately **$22,000**—we're more than halfway there!

Thank you to all who have generously contributed to getting our students on a smooth road again, and to all who are considering donating!

The Phnom Penh Municipal Administration recently suspended business activities that pose high risk of COVID transmission for 14 days, effective June 3rd through June 16th, as COVID cases have been on the rise in Cambodia since late January.

Fortunately, Roteang is currently in the "green zone."

RCC Students at Beltei International School

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and goggles, and all the equipment needed for science learning. And of course, I was delighted to see our children in their learning environments, happy, and so very proud to have us coming to see them at their schools!

At this writing, COVID has again caused children across Phnom Penh to learn remotely.

One of the state of the art science labs at Beltei

Our Beltei students, most of whom are now vaccinated if over age 12, spend their days at the RCC, attending classes using cell phones via apps like Telegram. As in the fall and winter, Chin Chanthorn, Daline and others help the youth with their homework.

But what is a typical day like for our youngsters during normal learning conditions? Our Beltei youth rise in the morning, have a hearty breakfast, and don their distinctive uniforms consisting of a white shirt with light blue trim, light blue pants, and sneakers. The bus takes the majority of our students to their Beltei campus in the morning, where they attend school from about 7 to 11 am, and return to the RCC for lunch. While at school, they receive a general Khmer education including learning to be good Cambodian citizens, attend a variety of classes in each subject, learn computer, learn English, stand for the Cambodian national anthem, and do calisthenic type exercises. Then a smaller group of youth depart on the bus for their turn at Beltei, attending school from about 1

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RCC Students at Beltei International School

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to 5 pm, returning home for dinner. When not at Beltei, our children attend English classes, computer instruction, and of course do their homework. One touching image: three of our younger children (Jasmine, Bopear, and Sreyleap) just began at Beltei, and on their first day, like nervous children attending the first day of school anywhere in the world, they asked Chanthan (Head Nanny) to stay with them and wait for them until they got used to their new environment.

Our attending youth span grades 1 through 12. Our board education liaisons monitor each child's progress carefully (and of course, this is true for children attending public schools as well.) Beltei also monitors students' learning through a variety of sources including classroom and standardized tests, student activities, attendance, and homework. Elephant tells us that many of our children do receive extra help direct from Beltei staff.

A selection of English and Khmer books in the library

The start of daily calisthenics

If we could choose, we would likely send most if not all of our children to Beltei, given the quality of education. A proficiency exam is required for entry and not all of our children are able to pass it. Two of our RCC children cannot attend due to the lack of accommodations (such as an elevator) for their physical challenges. Elephant states "Personally, I think that sending our children to Beltei is a good opportunity because there is a good education system there, good management, and the teachers who teach there are very good and knowledgeable. They pay attention to the (struggling) students (and notice) if students hide or look shy, then the teacher call them to show up so they learn to be brave...The teachers have many years of experience, responsibility and high performance." TSF

For more information and additional photos, see Beltei's very comprehensive website: www.beltei.edu.kh/eng/

The kids enjoying the bus ride

Get to know a few of our Beltei students!

SRUN SOK HENG

GRADE 12

Favorite subject is math

Likes cooking & art

Enjoys dancing and singing with the younger children

Helps other kids with homework

SOK CHANNA

GRADE 5

Favorite subject is English

Loves dancing

Plays soccer and loves fish

PREAP CHANROEUN

GRADE 9

Loves to study at school, especially math

Likes to read, play volleyball and soccer

Wants to go to university

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Check back on our website soon for dates and locations of upcoming craft fairs!

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The Sharing Foundation

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