The Sharing Foundation Newsletter

www.sharingfoundation.org

CARING FOR CAMBODIA'S CHILDREN

SPRING 2024

Medical Impressions

Sandra Meyerson, MD

Medical impressions of TSF visit from January 28–February 3, 2024

Ann organized a comprehensive and remarkable visit for me to Cambodia during late January/early February this year, and I was pleased my husband Matthew could join me. Elephant served as an excellent host, making all the arrangements and taking us to various sites each day. I appreciated Ann's and Elephant's knowledge of all RCC children and the diverse TSF programs as well as their ability to help me understand the complexities of Cambodia's medical system.

Sandra examines Sreyrath

As the medical advisor for TSF, it was helpful to see the children at the TSF orphanage (aka the Roteang Children's Center or RCC), visit the college students at their university dorms and meet with the TSF vocational students at their new dorm facility in Phnom Penh.

I examined 51 children: 39 at the orphanage, two college students at the university dorm and all ten of the young adults at the vocational center. Most of the students are healthy and thriving although there were a few medical issues that need follow up. Chita, who is responsible for organizing the medical care for the children, is doing an excellent job: She translated for me as I examined the children and informed me of ongoing medical issues and lab results,

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Weddings in Cambodia: "Same, Same but Different" from U.S.

Lee Steppacher

It is getting to be the season isn't it? Registries, flowers, long white dresses, attendants, rings, receptions and dancing. Spring and summer are a popular time for weddings here in the U.S.

But how do they celebrate marriage in Cambodia? As we frequently say, 'same, same but different!' Traditions are always changing, in Cambodia as well as in the U.S. It used to be that most weddings were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom, and the couple only found out who was their prospective spouse after negotiations were completed. That is not as common these days, especially in the cities. The young people in the TSF family, have chosen their own spouses and although they may ask a parent's permission, they decide to marry on their own accord. Still their weddings contain many of the revered Cambodian cultural customs. A 'traditional' Cambodian wedding is quite an affair, with many ceremonies spread over three days, including lots of symbolism and many guests.

At the wedding of TSF university graduates Thai Tharo and Ron Soneath

It begins by honoring one's ancestors, which is such an important and meaningful part of Cambodian culture (there are holidays devoted to honoring ancestors). The couple offers tea to their ancestors' spirits and invites them to be present for the impending ceremony.

The next tradition is Hai Goan Gomlon, the groom's procession. The groom and his family visit the bride's home and family, bringing many gifts. This can be a time to 'get to know each other' and it is also when the wedding rings are exchanged between the bride and groom.

Another tradition is the haircutting ceremony where a few locks of hair are cut from the bride and groom. This is to symbolize the letting go of each of their past lives and the beginning of their new life together.

Monks are ubiquitous throughout Cambodia and not surprisingly, they are an important part of the wedding traditions. Just like a minister, pastor or priest will bless the marriage union here in the U.S., Buddhist monks offer this to the couple in Cambodia. Soat Mon means monk blessing, and it is the part of the wedding when the monks chant

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Finding Their Way

Our hope for each child at the Roteang Children's Center (RCC) is that he or she grows into a happy and self-sufficient adult. We have had much success so far! Pharot has a masters degree and a successful job in administration, Vuthea is a doctor, two new college grads have great jobs already in Phnom Penh, and there are ten current university students. We have some kids that are successful tradespeople and a manager at a clothing factory. All are independent and doing what they want.

In my article of May 2023, I described the paths available to our teenagers and young adults including pursuing university or vocational education, working under our supervision, or remaining in our care if needed. Until this past fall, the vocational path has been challenging for us. We have not had a great resource for the kids that don't want to, or cannot, follow the university path. We also have lacked a place for kids who face behavioral challenges.

Six years ago, we enlisted our Operations Manager, Pen Ron, to find living situations for some of the children that needed to leave the RCC. He found them job training opportunities that offered a place to sleep or he kept them at his home. Living at job training meant a very rough and lonely life for the teen left there. Living with Pen Ron's family was tough on the family. We kept looking for solutions.

Two vocational programs have taken some of our kids in the past. "Friends," where we had placed six kids over the years, was closed permanently during Covid. The other, called "Caritas," was great but could only take three or four students at a time. Finding job training for these kids was also difficult. Caritas trained about six of our kids in beauty salon work, the restaurant trades and motor and air conditioning repair, however the AC and motor repair jobs required sleeping at the shops. Then, when more and more of our RCC kids needed job training, Caritas was full.

A few years ago, we started focusing on the living space we needed for our kids that were leaving school. We knew it had to be supervised by staff and near job opportunities. Pen Ron came up with the solution. He had built a cement building near his home as an investment property. It consists of nine rooms, each with a private bath. Elephant, Pen Ron and the TSF Board collaborated on turning this into a dormitory that TSF could afford to rent. Ann Bates donated the necessary funds to make needed upgrades including adding a shared kitchen and sitting area as well as cleaning up the yard for laundry and hanging out. We started housing our kids there in the summer of 2023.

Our first two residents were Touch Srey Neang and Pov Socheat. They are both over 21 but not ready to live on their own. Touch Srey Neang was trained in the restaurant business at Caritas and has overcome her extreme shyness to succeed in her new position at a lovely restaurant nearby. She bikes to work every day. She will be ready to leave us soon. Pov Socheat has had mental health issues and behavioral challenges. Although Elephant has found her several jobs, she keeps losing them. She is unofficially Elephant's "big headache" at the moment.

Hay Leap cooking in the Vocational Center

The Vocational Center residents

Relaxing in the Vocational Center courtyard

We now have ten RCC kids living at the Vocational Center. We hired Heng Phally to live there and help the young adults find work, prepare meals, and learn living skills. He is a family man, retired from the military.

A few months ago, the Cambodian government opened a new vocational training center very near our Vocational Residence. We have enrolled five of our kids there! Another one of the kids, Hay Leap, set his heart on working at a barber shop. He is now happily employed, cutting hair, nearby.

I feel greatly relieved to have created a situation that lives up to TSF standards where some of our more challenging kids can have the chance to live, train and mature. We have about 20 teens over the age of 16 coming our way soon. Hopefully we have found a positive way forward for them all. TSF

"Chita" A Chip off the Old Block

Korey Lee

What happens when you grow up in a home where your father goes to work looking after hundreds of children and young adults every day, and who also expresses his concern for his country, the underprivileged and the importance of an honest day's work? The Sharing Foundation has hired this special person. Chita, daughter of Elephant, has come to us at a very critical time. The needs of our children were getting more complex: they were growing up, moving out, living in dorms, and it was getting increasingly hard for Elephant to keep track of them and tend to their special needs.

While we initially had concerns about hiring the daughter of our in-country Director, her organizational skills, background in business, compassion and maturity persuaded us that she was the best candidate to assist Elephant. She has been on the job for about a year now, and she has already achieved great success in this new position.

Chita has proven herself invaluable in putting the health of our children at the top of her priority list. Having been around the Roteang Children's Center all of her adult life, the children are naturally comfortable with her. Our staff members also respect her and they work with her when she expresses a need or makes a request. Currently Chita and Chanthorn, another important staff member, are working with the children on internet safety. This topic was something that they both could see the need for and they are quietly putting protocols in place.

Chita oversees the signing of the laptop care & use contracts by happy TSF college students

Chita smiles for the camera

In addition to tending to the health concerns of our RCC residents, including getting them to all necessary appointments and keeping track of next steps, Chita has taken on the task of overseeing our University students. Although these young adults are capable of taking care of themselves, there is still a need to address social and dormitory issues. Just as our American kids still need help navigating challenges in university, our Cambodian students are no different. Chita counsels both the dorm parents and individual students. Some issues just need a mature guide. Others require assistance from other TSF staff or outside parties. Chita knows how to handle herself and differentiate what she can do and what requires support from Elephant.

Chita has truly mastered the art of an ever changing day. Her day might start out with an agenda of getting to the university dorms but, alas, a child has developed a sickness and needs to be taken to a clinic. No problem, just pivot and do what needs to be done. And that is exactly what Chita will do. She has quickly become a maternal figure to our large population and we couldn't appreciate her any more. TSF

Medical Impressions

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which allowed us to jointly update the medical records. I also shared my findings about the children's health with her (based on my discussions with and examinations of them), and we discussed pursuing medical specialists to address these new or ongoing problems. We also talked about mental health issues; we believe we have identified therapists and psychiatrists that the children with needs can meet with regularly.

One day Chita and I visited Sunrise Hospital, the new hospital where the RCC children had physical examinations in 2023, which I felt were comprehensive based on the reports I reviewed. On our hospital tour, we viewed the impressive facility and met with the chief doctor. He suggested specialists who could see our children at the hospital and informed us of services Sunrise couldn't provide. I feel he is a competent physician, well-trained in Japan and the US; I also believe the facility is of good quality, although we are also aware of the need for additional resources for some specialty medical care.

Dr. Meyerson performing a medical exam on Ros Chanta

We also visited the National Pediatric Hospital in Phnom Penh—from what we saw, the facility seemed clean and well-organized. I also stopped at a community clinic near the RCC, where the physician was administering intravenous medications or fluids to community members with acute problems and competently assessing children and adults from what I observed. It's good to know there is a satisfactory medical clinic so close to our kids.

Elephant also showed us the farm project, where I observed approximately 40 children in two classrooms. These children from the Roteang community would not otherwise have an opportunity for education. They do not have to wear uniforms (which is a prerequisite for public school) so the poorest children are able to attend. They all looked healthy and well-nourished. Matthew and I also had the chance to visit TSF's English program, the four schools TSF supports across the Mekong River, and the government-owned Kampong Speu orphanage. At all these locations the children appeared healthy and of appropriate weight. It was particularly interesting to see the contrast between the children at Kampong Speu and our RCC children, which showed the good support that most orphans are receiving in Cambodia.

When I reflect on TSF's health challenges, the RCC's transition from primarily an orphanage to an organization responsible for teenagers entering vocational training and initial work stands out. As a Board, TSF has

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NOTEWORTHY

In February, Elephant took our RCC kids to Kep for an overnight field trip, which boasts a national park and beach. It is approximately 90 minutes from Phnom Penh.

Letters are due **May 15th** to your sponsored student or child—they can be sent to the following:

University: mardisdunton@gmail.com

High School: mstockford2000@gmail.com

RCC: lysimons@gmail.com

All **10** of our high school sponsored students and our **4** RCC seniors passed the National Exam! **This is the first time TSF has seen a 100% pass rate**. Congratulations to our First Years!

Their first semester began Feb. 19th. We now have 65 students in our university program, up from 10 students in our first year (2008). TSF has rented a third dorm to accommodate all college students!

In January, all TSF university students were gifted laptops generously donated by several donors

Salary increases, annual or merit raises for our Cambodian staff occur each March

Cambodia Visit

Dr. Caron Shake

My husband Mark and I traveled to Cambodia and The Roteang Children's Center (RCC) in early November 2023. We had visited the RCC, when it was known as the Roteang Orphanage, more than 22 years earlier. Mark had joined his older brother, Pat, who was part of a group of soon-to-be parents, who were traveling to Roteang to pick up the children they planned to adopt. Mark took care of Pat's new baby while Pat did the paperwork for the adoption. My Mom and I followed a few days later, toured Cambodia and visited the orphanage. My husband and Mom were impressed by the staff at the orphanage. Each child had their own nanny which was very special.

A few years later, we started sponsoring children at the orphanage, and over the years we began sponsoring children to attend high school, the first of whom was Sum Srey Rath, whom we continued to sponsor through university. She graduated with an accounting degree and began work at a bank. We kept in touch with her and we often called or messaged each other via Facebook. Later Srey Rath met a young man named Duran Ren at the bank and married him. They now have a three-year-old little girl named Anthika—a cute and funny character. Ren and Srey Rath have always called us mom and dad, and Anthika calls us grandma and grandpa.

Makara's extended Family

Mark with namesake new baby, Caron

Sum Sreyrath with extended family, Mark and Caron

Last year Mark and I decided to return to Cambodia to meet Srey Rath and her family in person. We also wanted to meet the four other students we are sponsoring (three in high school, and one, Makara, who attends university) and 17-year-old Dalika, one of the RCC children we have sponsored for years.

We booked our flights for November and excitedly discussed our visit with Srey Rath and Ren. Here is a message that Srey Rath sent us six months before our trip: *"We are doing well here, and I am 26 weeks pregnant now and will deliver at the end of July. Baby is fine. My husband and I name her as: Durun RathCaron. Would you mind if we named her as yours? I don't know how to express my feelings about getting a big opportunity from both of you. Thank you for supporting me to finish my university. Because of this support I have changed my life from a farmer daughter to being a banker who can support my family back. You got nothing from me, but you are really happy to see my success and happiness. You are not loved only by me but by all of my family members. Thank you for letting me be part of your life. I love you both so much."*

Her message to us was so sweet and welcomed. So, we now have two "granddaughters", and they look nothing like either of us.

Our trip to Cambodia could not have been better. We met and spent time with Srey Rath and Ren and both of their mothers. We also met Makara's whole family. Afterward his grandma shared in a letter that we are part of her family now, which is so nice.

We also spent a wonderful day at the RCC, attended the university graduation celebrations, met our three high school kids and got to hug Dalika. We plan to travel to Roteang again in two years to attend Makara's graduation and, of course, visit everyone again. TSF

Weddings in Cambodia: "Same, Same but Different" from U.S.

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blessings, and sprinkle water and flowers on the couple. Guests are present during this ceremony and are expected to silently bow their heads in a posture of reverence. It is common to see this blessing occur on the streets of Phnom Penh, where a portion of the sidewalk is curtained off with tented white drapes and people are gathered inside while monks chant. You can hear the chants as you walk by and it feels quite magical.

Not only are ancestors honored, but parents are as well. Called Bang Chhat Madaiy, or Parent's Veneration, the bride and groom hold umbrellas over their parents' heads and offer them many fruits and sweets. The act of holding the umbrella symbolizes the couple protecting their parents, as their parents did for them when they were kids. This is really a thank you to their parents for all they have been given growing up.

And then the knot tying ceremony begins. The couple kneel on the ground and together hold a sword which is a symbol of loyalty and protection. While they are on their knees, family and friends tie red string around their wrists to represent lasting love and the bringing together of these two people. The strings stay on their wrists until they naturally fall off, often days later. To complete the ceremony, their friends shower them with palm flowers dipped in holy water and maybe palm seeds too, as a way to wish the couple well. This part sounds so similar to the western tradition of throwing rice at the end of a wedding ceremony.

TSF university graduates Thai Tharo and Ron Soneath pose for photos

The reception is a celebration filled with music, dance and lots of food. It can be big, often with well over one hundred people attending. The guests generally bring cash instead of gifts to help the couple set out in their new lives.

Wedding clothing is just beautiful. It might be that the bride and groom will have up to seven outfits to wear throughout the several day ceremony. Most are made from silk in vibrant colors, and the bride and groom will match. The groom will wear traditional Khmer pants and top. The bride is bedecked with lots of jewelry and make up. There is not a long white gown as those of us in the U.S. are used to, but the clothing for a wedding in Cambodia is just as unique and special. So many of the homes I go into have a large wedding photograph of the couple in beautiful wedding attire in the central part of the living space.

Weddings are a reason for joyous celebration in Cambodia, just like the U.S. A number of our university alumni are married (many to another alum), and so we celebrate, from a distance, with them. TSF

Give the Gift of Education

New worlds open! That's what happens for Cambodian children who are gifted uniforms through The Sharing Foundation each year—1,500 of them! Uniforms are a requirement for attending school in many developing nations. Cambodia is no different. Since our early beginnings, TSF has been making and giving uniforms to children whose families can't afford them.

Running out to lunch? Need a gift at the last minute? Share the gift of education for a young child with a friend, a teacher or for that someone who has everything. It's the perfect way to say thank you, happy birthday, or good luck all while doing some good in the world. No doubt interesting conversation will follow!

*It's easy to do. Just donate via our website and in the comment section indicate UNIFORMS (or send a check to **TSF, PO Box 600, Concord, MA 01742**). Cards and envelopes will be sent to your home. They are $15 for one card and/or three for $40.*

Thank you for helping so many children receive the gift of knowledge.

Medical Impressions

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observed social and vocational problems like drug abuse, adolescent pregnancy and inability to maintain jobs that often seem related to mental health challenges. The TSF staff members in Cambodia are addressing these problems through mental health interventions and access to reliable contraception. This is an ongoing issue that TSF faces, for which we need to have constant awareness.

Mostly, I feel optimistic about the medical care the TSF children are getting at the RCC, and at the university and vocational centers. There is good access to both primary care and specialty care for TSF children at the Sunrise Hospital, the National Pediatric Hospital, and other facilities in Phnom Penh, and the medical care the children are receiving seems adequate. Chita and Elephant have to navigate a complicated system in order to advocate for the children which takes a lot of time and energy. I am grateful for their perseverance.

I had a wonderful visit to Cambodia and went away with golden memories of the beautiful RCC children and at other facilities that TSF runs. The children's amazing dance and musical performances for us, and their smiles and cheerful dispositions, have left a lasting impression on me. I also enjoyed meeting and connecting with the caring, devoted and loving staff at all the TSF facilities. I hope to continue to help from afar with medical issues that arise. I will hold the TSF children in my heart as I continue taking care of my pediatric patients here in the US. TSF

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The Sharing Foundation

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