


 Celebrating *25* Years of service to
CAMBODIA



Looking Back – Looking Ahead

Spring 2015

LOOKING BACK – Twenty-five years ago, I remember sitting with a consular officer in the Canadian embassy in Bangkok. I had just told him I was heading into Cambodia via Laos. He just stared at me. “You have to understand,” he began to say, “If you go in there, no one is coming to get you out if anything goes wrong. It’s a war zone and you are completely on your own.” I smiled and told him the lack of any western diplomatic missions in the country was not an issue for me. Several days later I sat in the Cambodian embassy in Vientiane, Laos being scolded at by an indignant diplomat. He felt insulted that I would travel and expect him to issue a visa on the great holiday of the people – May Day. It was clearly an oversight on my part! But, after putting me in my place he handed back my passport. To my surprise, the visa was already stamped. It was May 1st and I was issued visa number 580 for the year 1990. Clearly I was entering a country very few visited. The sense of entering a forbidden and mysterious world was powerful and exciting.

My flight into Phnom Penh was on an old Soviet Antonov 24 (fittingly referred to as a “Clank”). I found a seat with a seatbelt that worked and sat down, already exhausted by the heat. Other Cambodian passengers were on board. They were returning to try and find mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers – loved ones who had went missing years before during the Killing Fields. Some shifted nervously, one physically shook, while others openly wept. All of us stared out the windows for our first glimpse of this beautiful and isolated land.



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Then & now: a street in downtown Phnom Penh in 1990 versus today.

Stepping off the aircraft and seeing the soldiers that had come out to greet our arrival was an electrifying moment. After seven flights and days of waiting, I was finally standing on what seemed already for me “holy ground”. Walking towards the deserted airport terminal, I noticed that many of the windows were broken. Those still intact were so filthy that you could barely see through them. The city was a time capsule, run down and decrepit – much as it had been left in 1975. People had returned to the various districts, but the streets were still pretty empty and strangely quiet given the lack of motorized vehicles. I was excited by the whole experience, but did not yet know that serving this place would represent the central calling in my life.

From the very first day I stepped into the country, I began to fall in love with Cambodia and her people. We would walk the near-empty streets with giggling children pointing and calling us “Soviet”. Adults were quick to smile, soldiers would want their picture taken and we would laugh at each other’s inability to communicate. It was a poor, but warm and lovely place. If you suspended critical thinking just for a moment, it could almost seem normal – but it wasn’t. Each morning armoured trains would load their passengers onto the old wooden freight cars, each carrying soldiers with machine guns on top. During the day, bloodied shell-shocked boy soldiers could be seen hovering near food stands. In the evening, the streets were deserted. Everyone was off the streets by curfew and distant shooting could be heard. There was a subtle tension in everything and everyone. The Khmer Rouge were not far away and everyone knew it... the sight of our western faces was cause for some hope. Perhaps the doors of isolation would open and the world would come and help. Indeed they did, but not for a few more years.

I longed that these people who had experienced such pain and trauma would come to know peace, security, and hope in the future. I imagined a Phnom Penh of freedom, laughter and song. I imagined a vibrant Church serving the needs of its people with compassion and joy. I imagined so much, but the reality was so bleak. Whatever the odds and however overwhelming the circumstances, it was no longer time to imagine. It was time to act.

Brian with Ratanak’s first ambulance, which provided urgent care in provinces where there were no emergency services.



An emergency rice distribution program, initiated after flooding had destroyed the majority of Cambodia’s harvest.



Children from ‘Sunshine School’, an education program for children with disabilities.



A literacy program in war-torn Battambang educating Cambodians in rural provinces as part of a church-based community development program.



*Since 1990,
Ratanak International has
served thousands of people
through various programs
across every province in
Cambodia.*



LOOKING AHEAD – Most recently I stepped off the shiny new airbus from Seoul and walked up the glass bridge to the Phnom Penh Airport terminal of polished tile and marble. Within minutes I was issued visa number GC435346 and found myself out into the throng of well-wishers and taxi drivers. I settled into the air-conditioned taxi for the long traffic jam all the way to the hotel, and observed as the driver watched a Michael Jackson music video on his video terminal. The streets are no longer quiet, dilapidated and empty. They are full, really full, active and vibrant. Huge glass towers stand where homes used to be and housing developments fill what were previously fields. Such “progress” does not necessarily help everyone. Wealth is not distributed evenly and millions have been left out of the progress. Corruption generates both overwhelming poverty and grotesque opulence.

As I travelled through the bustling city, my thoughts turned to all our projects over the years that have served so many of the neighborhoods I was driving through. What a privilege to have served so many lives in so many ways. Emergency food, medical services, sanitation, irrigation, safe housing, literacy, job skills training, rehabilitation and a compassionate hand have impacted thousands of people. We have been witness to the transformation of a nation, but the problems continue to be vast. The recovery from almost total societal destruction, war and genocide is neither easy nor quick, but it is clearly underway.

I no longer have to imagine a Cambodian Church. There are now many churches and many people within them seeking to serve those suffering around them with what little they have. Poverty, trauma, and tragedy are still all present in abundance, but if you look closely there is a difference – something subtle, but absolutely vital has changed. Where poverty, trauma and tragedy used to rule to the exclusion of all else, they now have to coexist with something new – hope. If there is any single thing I am most excited about, looking back over 25 years, it is the prospect that we have been allowed to participate in the process of being an agent of hope in a nation that had very little. Today in Cambodia, despite the struggles, there is hope in the future; hope for dignity, and for many, hope in a God that died for them.

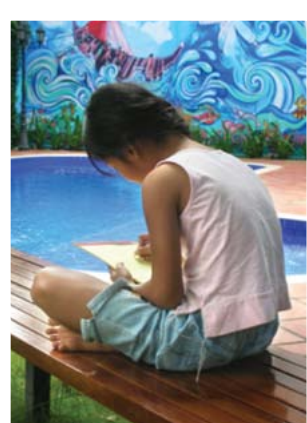
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A young girl writes in her diary at NewSong– a rehabilitation centre for exploited children.

Prisoners learn mechanical skills in a prison outreach program, which provides skills to help them find employment upon release.

Young women from the Ratanak Achievement Program. The program assists victims of sexual slavery in their transition back into society.

An irrigation dam that has controlled flooding in the area and provided 20,000 people with access to water for their crops.



Cambodia is not the same country I first visited. There has been genuine progress. This is the result of the hard work of so many brave and struggling Cambodians that I have grown to trust and admire, and the good work of many international organizations that arrived after the fighting had stopped and the UN opened the doors. It is also the result of 25 years of a focused commitment that predates peace, diplomatic relations and the UN – a focus made possible by the encouragement and support you have so consistently given Ratanak. I am indebted to you all. However, all our commitment, focus and hard work would mean nothing if we did not have God’s love for the people of Cambodia guiding, directing and encouraging. Ratanak belongs to Christ and is driven, ultimately, by Him. I am deeply honoured and satisfied to have been witness to God’s compassion for Cambodia over 25 years. My hope is that we will continue to know God’s blessing as we continue down the long road toward Cambodia’s healing, and that you will join us in that ongoing journey.



Blessings,
Brian McConaghy
Founding & Executive Director

MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

In 2015 we are beginning some exciting new initiatives to impact even more lives in Cambodia! Will you join us?



Anti-Exploitation Programs

A growing number of Cambodians are being trafficked internationally and exploited in other countries. This year, Ratanak International is engaging in a new initiative to support survivors who have been offered safe passage home to Cambodia. After suffering much, these young men, women and children will be connected with a variety of services to help them re-establish their lives in their home country.



Infrastructure Development

Ratanak International will also be contributing towards a water filtration system for a displaced community of 488 people. Lack of clean water has been an issue in this community for over 5 years, inflicting many with various water-borne diseases. The water filtration system will provide this community with clean water so they can provide for their families instead of constantly battling illnesses and paying for expensive medication.

In celebration of Ratanak International’s 25th Anniversary, we are releasing a new, full-length documentary – *The Long Road*. We invite you to step into Cambodia’s journey towards restoration and learn how a nation can heal from a past of pain and trauma. More details about screening events across Canada can be found at www.ratanak.org/thelongroad



Renew hope. Restore Cambodia.