

Ratanak was an eleven month old girl who died in 1989 because no medical supplies were available in Cambodia. In response, this charity is devoted to serving Cambodia's vulnerable and exploited.

Stories of Transformation

Summer 2014

PREY ROMEAS: A COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION

By Brian McConaghy, Founder & Executive Director

When UN aid started pouring into Cambodia in the mid 1990s, the intention was for such aid to be distributed evenly

This situation was compounded by the fact that surrounding villages seemed to have access to international aid and were making real, visible progress. There was no Christian presence in Prey Romeas, and no apparent future for those living there.



Above: On a visit to Prey Romeas, Brian reviews plans for the land.

throughout the country. However, such endeavors never quite work out as planned. Some villages received substantial developmental aid, while others were left with little if any assistance – the funds, instead, landing in the pockets of corrupt officials. Such was the community of Prey Romeas.

Desperate to support their families but with little assistance or opportunities, the youth of the community were vulnerable to criminal activity. Many, particularly males, found themselves unemployed, sliding into drug use, drug dealing and eventually landing in prison.

Right: The plot of land we have purchased in Prey Romeas.



Sopheas, a young man from Prey Romeas, moved to the capital city in hopes of gaining an education to create more opportunities for himself. He had little money and discovered through the grapevine that there was cheap accommodation available through a local church. He jumped at the chance, and met

Christians who reached out to him with genuine care. He was attracted by their beliefs and wanted to learn more about this God that compelled them to such love. Eventually, he dedicated his life to Christ. He became a pastor at that same church, serving in the community and expanding the church's student dorms program (funded by Ratanak) to include an outreach program.

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Sopheas's home village was not open to Christianity. He had tried to minister to his friends, family and neighbors, but there was no interest. To them, Christianity was a foreign and "western" religion, and no good could come out of rejecting the traditions of the community. However, they were aware of Sopheas's life choices. They saw how he loved and honoured his mother, who was still living in Prey Romeas. Furthermore, he seemed to be living with dignity, unlike so many of their sons and husbands who had fallen victim to hopelessness and criminal

activity. Families started asking if their sons could stay at the church dorms while studying at school or seeking work in the capital. At the dorms, these young men developed important skills through computer, literacy, sports and education programs offered by the church. Most importantly, they experienced love and compassion, and finally started gaining hope for the future. Slowly but surely, the village started opening up to the gospel, their hearts softening as they witnessed a transformation in these young men.

These transformations coincided with the building of large garment factories near Prey Romeas. The factories are owned by large multi-national corporations, and make the brand names we all know (or even buy!). Village girls from rural Cambodia make up a large proportion of the workforce, arriving by the hundreds hoping to make their fortune. Young and innocent, these women end up working long hours, earning only about \$60 a month. They are highly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and trafficking as a result of financial desperation and naiveté. Sophea wanted to serve such girls by providing them a safe place to live, in dorms much like the ones that had so transformed his own life.

Sophea's example and the transformed lives of other young men, now thriving in the city, formed a foundation of openness and respect for Christianity. Seeking to build on this acceptance, Ratanak is partnering with Sophea's church to develop an outreach program. We are seizing this opportunity to bring some long and overdue development to Prey Romeas that will be a blessing to the community. It is our prayer that in the future, it will be a place of hope to the many factory girls now in the area as well.

Some months ago, Ratanak purchased a large plot of land in Prey Romeas. This has already been leveled and walled, and is ready for the building of what will become a multi-purpose complex. It will house a school, kids club, youth sports and church. This 'Phase One' of the project is designed to support and encourage the community through the offering of programs and the building of relationships. Once established and community trust

gained, we hope that 'Phase Two' will be the provision of dorms for factory girls – a safe place where they can be both encouraged and protected from those who would seek to prey on them.

The Ratanak Prey Romeas Outreach Project is a long-term endeavor with a local church and in a community not previously open

to such ministry. In the best Ratanak tradition, we are seeking to equip, encourage and support Cambodians such as Sophea as they transform their villages into a place of hope and safety. Through this project, we can serve not only the village residents, but also the hundreds of vulnerable girls flocking to the area in hopes of building a prosperous future for themselves and their families. Please pray for us as we seek to navigate the complexities of community life and be true servants in this exciting process.



Above: Pastor Sophea

THE HANDS & FEET OF CHRIST

By Lisa Cheong, Cambodia Country Director

The UN estimated in 2012 that there were 76,000 people in Cambodia living with HIV. Its prevalence is among the highest in Southeast Asia, but has been steadily declining in recent years. For almost a decade, Ratanak International has helped families affected by HIV/AIDS through our staff at Sunrise, a local organization working amongst the poorest of the poor in Cambodia. The Ratanak Medical Care (RMC) Program provides much-needed care and encouragement to vulnerable populations who are often ostracized because of poverty and illness. The program engages and supports prisoners, children, mothers and families as it seeks to practically demonstrate Christ's unconditional love to communities the world has looked down upon.

In February, Sathya, our Finance Manager, and I went on a three-hour trek to visit the RMC program. It was quite the journey! Unlike Canada, where we have to deal with snowstorms, fog or ice storms, here we have to deal with "dust storms". The storm formed from red clay, and created a mist that followed us as we drove along the main highway. Thankfully, our driver, Sambath, did a great job despite the periods of limited visibility.

Upon arrival, we sat down with our Khmer partners – Darany (the Program Director), Dr. Mony, Chhun and Sopheak. Dr. Mony, at 67 years old, makes house calls in 4 different communes to care



Above: A factory near Prey Romeas.

for his patients with HIV/AIDS and other serious illnesses. Chhun assists Dr. Mony, and also makes house calls, befriending, encouraging and providing educational assistance to the children of these patients. Finally, there's Sopheak the accountant. Being a part of such meetings is such a privilege for me. At the heart of Ratanak's mission is seeing the Khmer people empowered and helping their own. Here in this program, the compassion the staff members have for those whom they serve is so evident.



Left: Chhun, a loyal Sunrise staff member.

One of the main goals of the RMC Program is to provide holistic support to the poor and vulnerable in this province. The Home Based Care visits began in 2002, when the provincial hospital was learning more about the growing HIV positive (HIV+) population, but had no way of following up with them. Since then, the RMC Program has provided consistent care with medicine, supplemental food, shelter, and family support for HIV+ people living in poverty. Over this past month, Dr. Mony has visited and cared for 49 clients, binding their wounds and serving as a witness to Christ's love for those overcome with despair. Pray for Dr. Mony, that he will continue to be the hands and feet of Christ as he brings good news to those who are suffering and prays for each patient that he visits.

While Dr. Mony ministers to parents who are dying of HIV, Chhun tends to the needs of the children of these families. So often, they feel neglected and shunned by their friends and classmates because of the stigma attached to having family with HIV/AIDS. Such visits are designed to encourage them in numerous ways, reminding them that they are precious and loved. Children who have lost their parents to AIDS receive help in making memory books so they'll always remember where they came from. Staff members also help them process their feelings, tutor them for their classes at school, and provide for their school uniforms on an annual basis. One of the children recently wrote a note of thanks to staff:

I'm Chheng, a 13 year-old girl in Home Based Care children service. I don't know how to write well from my heart. I'm just making a short report the best I can do. Due to my parents living in poverty with HIV, I felt hopeless and lonely. No one cared about me. I didn't have many friends or relatives to visit me, I dared not to



Above: Ratanak and Sunrise staff in a meeting.

have a dream about studying, my life was covered by darkness. But now the opposite! I have Lokrou Chhun (Lokrou is a Khmer word meaning teacher) to visit and encourage me a few times monthly to hear my feelings and needs. I'm so happy that the Home Based Care Program has provided me extra money to pay school fees. This brings me hope and helps me a lot in my studying. Now my dreams are coming back. Thanks Home Based Care! I love you!

Dr Mony also visits prisoners at the provincial prison. Here in Cambodia, provincial prisons often lack medical personnel who are qualified to diagnose basic illnesses. Furthermore, they do not have the financial or medical capacity to purchase and give medicine to those who are ill. So, in 2009, daily visits to the prison began, attending to the needs of approximately 20 prisoners with minor illnesses four days a week. Similar to the Home Based Care visits, the RMC Program now provides basic medical support and supplemental nutrition for prisoners through these daily visits. For prisoners who are bed-ridden, staff also prepare extra nutritional meals to help their recovery.

This year, our program has expanded to include the distribution of infant formula to HIV+ mothers to help decrease mother-to-child transmission. The infant formula distribution project supports HIV+ mothers for one year, and they receive it when they go to the hospital for their anti-retroviral medications.

Below is a testimony from a mother who is HIV+ and receiving infant formula for her baby:

I am Phal, 39 years old. My job is a farm worker. I have lived with AIDS about 10 years. Before I was diagnosed, I had always had headache almost every day. I decided to go to the health center to have the blood test which found HIV. The reason that I have a child because I did not know about the pregnancy. From month to month my stomach grew bigger. Thus I had checked it at the hospital and saw a four-month-old child. I kept this child. My child is alive until now because Sunrise has provided me infant formula milk. My child is a boy and 10 months old now. After the first blood test he is negative and healthy!

As I left the village, Matthew 25:40 came to my mind: "Truly whatever you do for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." In Cambodian society, those who have AIDS or HIV are often looked down upon because of the common belief that they must have done something wrong in their previous life (according to Karma) and must deserve what is happening to them in this life. Thank God that as believers in Christ, the staff members at Sunrise are living examples of Christ's compassion to those whom the wider culture looks down upon. Their efforts in caring for these the world has forgotten demonstrate, once again, that God is close to the broken-hearted. He is close to the poor, rejected and abandoned. He is close to the ostracized, mocked and outcast. For in Jesus, dignity and value replace the yoke of shame and disease. In Jesus, the poor, the weak, the sick, the prisoner and the vulnerable do not only have a friend, they have a Savior, a Deliverer and a Redeemer.

NEWS IN BRIEF

E-Newsletter

With the recent increase in postage prices, we would greatly appreciate it if you would consider signing up to receive our electronic newsletter instead of the physical copy. If you would like to switch, or are already receiving the electronic version and would like to stop receiving the paper newsletter, please e-mail us at info@ratanak.org. Thank you!

National Prayer Breakfast

Brian recently had the honor of speaking at the National Prayer Dinner in Ottawa, addressing leaders of all political platforms as they unite to pray for Canada. It was wonderful to encourage their faith with the example of children who love Jesus despite their circumstances. What a privilege it was to introduce many in positions of influence to the children of Cambodia!

Ride for Refuge

Ratanak is once again gearing up for the Ride for Refuge! This year's ride will be on October 4, 2014, so be sure to mark that Saturday off on your calendars. It's never too early to start a team and tell your friends. The Ride is one way you can make a difference here at home in the lives of Cambodians, and it starts with simply riding your bicycle. Our goal this year is to have 400 riders all over Canada riding for Cambodia. Be one of the 400! Register today at www.rideforrefuge.org and be sure to check our Facebook page regularly for updates.

Correction

In our last newsletter, we wrote about a nurse who had dedicated her life to her patients. Her son made a donation in memory of her service to others that allowed Ratanak to buy two ambulances. We incorrectly named the nurse as Dorothy Erdman, another very special friend of Ratanak, who fervently prayed for our ministry. This nurse was, in fact, not Dorothy but a member of her extended family. Both of them were such a blessing to Ratanak, and we are so grateful for their hearts and dedication to the people of Cambodia. Our sincerest apologies for the error!

Incredible Ratanak Race



The 2nd annual Incredible Ratanak Race took place on May 10 in Vancouver, BC. Racers ran all over the city, completing mental challenges, performing difficult tasks, and eating "adventurous" foods while trying to win the coveted first place. It was a day of smiles and laughter, and we're grateful for all our volunteers and sponsors who supported the race. A generous donor has offered to match all donations made until July 31, 2014 (up to a maximum of \$20,000), and so far \$9,500 has been raised (the doubled amount)! Donate at www.chimp.net/groups/ratanak and your gift will be doubled!

This May marked 24 years since I first walked into Cambodia. What a journey it has been! I am so grateful for your continued support and as you walk alongside me with your prayers encouragement. It is such a blessing to be able to join hands with you in transforming the lives of those God has deemed precious enough to die for. I hope that through these stories, we can bring Cambodia a little closer to home and give you a sense of just what an impact you are making.

Blessings,

Brian McConaghy

Ratanak



International

BRINGING LIFE TO THE KILLING FIELDS OF CAMBODIA

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