

# Ratanak International

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.

## Fellowship & Transformation

Spring 2013

### DINNER WITH FRIENDS

In so many ways the circumstances were completely normal. I was sitting at the end of a table having supper with about twenty Cambodians, most of them teenage girls eager to get into the fried chicken we had brought at their request. It was chaos as the food was distributed. Everyone chatted. The adults sorted out the drinks and the girls got up and down, going in all directions for no apparent reason – teenagers! I watched the scene with the greatest of satisfaction, for this was not a normal meal for me. This meal was at the Ratanak Achievement Program (RAP) home.

The RAP home had opened only a few months earlier after several years of planning. It is designed as a place where girls who have been sold as children into the brothels, can reintegrate back into society after years of careful rehabilitation. This is the last step, a celebration, if you will, of all they have accomplished and a chance to look forward to futures of freedom and normality.

After so much planning and prayer, to sit and watch the meal in progress was an absolute joy. The girls, now 17 to 20 years of age, chatted, laughed and kidded each other – it was so normal. I couldn't help but smile, what a privilege to care for such kids... now young women.

It was not long before attention was drawn to me just sitting and smiling at them all. The conversation quickly turned to what I was thinking, why was I sun burned, what movie stars I looked like and didn't look like etc. Apparently I looked like some, except older and fatter! Those of you who have teenage daughters know that being the target of their observations does not always contribute to a good self-esteem! I was glad I was red with sunburn. My embarrassment at being the subject of their attention didn't show! Yet even this



was wonderful to me. Here were thirteen girls who had suffered much at the hands of western males comfortable enough with me, a middle aged white male, to poke fun, laugh and act the way any group of teenage girls would respond to Dad. It was not completely comfortable but I felt deeply honoured that the traditional formality found in Cambodian society had yielded to their sense of humour and fun. Who would have thought, years ago



Above: Special fried chicken dinner at the RAP home.

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*Above (Left to Right): Young women at the RAP home baking, enjoying movies together, and practicing dancing for a Christmas celebration.*

when I first met them as children, that a meal with such broken kids would be characterized by the words 'humour' and 'fun'!

Despite the candidness and humour it should be understood that the context is still extremely difficult for these girls. The currents of trauma still run deep in their lives and the RAP staff have had their hands full dealing with many issues since the girls arrived. These young women are coming from rehabilitation environments where they have been cared for, loved and valued. They must now step back into the larger world of Cambodian society which is nowhere near as friendly, where they are not valued and where the ghosts of the past are everywhere.

The whole point of RAP is to teach them how to reintegrate into this society. Our desire is that they learn to make their own life decisions and to be independent. The problem with such a plan is that they learn to make their own life decisions and become independent! While they are guided and coached by staff they must be allowed to make decisions for themselves and at times deal with the consequences of bad choices. The staff work very hard to give them the tools to decide well, but there has been plenty of heartache since we opened. The staff are in a constant process of evaluating both decisions and behaviour to assess what is trauma based and what is completely normal poor teenage decision-making. It can be very hard to sort out how best to counsel them as they navigate real life and its consequences. It is safe to say the staff are absolutely exhausted in this process.

It reminds me of how God must view us. It is absolutely necessary that we have freedom of choice if we are to be fully human. The problem with this is that we have freedom to choose good... or evil! I learn much about God's patience with us as I watch the RAP staff dealing over and over again with issues of behaviour, discipline, respect, curfew, and yes, boys! How patient they have to be, how patient God is with us. It would be so much easier to rule with an iron fist and exert control. But the whole point of RAP is to prepare the girls to manage freedom. Freedom without adequate awareness can be a dangerous thing, if not harnessed

and moderated. And so it is with God – teaching, guiding and insisting we go the right direction while still allowing us the freedom to make poor decisions all the while promising to help us despite our failures... sounds like a day at RAP!

The girls at RAP must exercise judgment and learn to cope with self-management, self-discipline and self-motivation, which are new and largely unknown to them.

In this context the fried chicken was served, the girls laughed, the staff fussed and I, feeling much like a proud father, just sat and smiled.

*Remember to pray for the girls as they struggle with freedom and remember to pray for the exhausted staff as they repeatedly pick the girls up dust them off, assure them that they are loved, counsel them and pensively watch as, once again the girls try to navigate the challenges of real life.*



*Above: Young women at the RAP home praying together to calm some nerves before performing a traditional dance.*



## THE RESTORATION OF SONS & BROTHERS

I was being interviewed on the side of a Phnom Penh street for a TV show. It was impossible to concentrate. Across from me was a young man, apparently mentally ill, obviously recently beaten and dressed as a young girl! The image of him sitting on a bench twitching and shaking was absolutely heartbreaking... a spectacle of human brokenness.

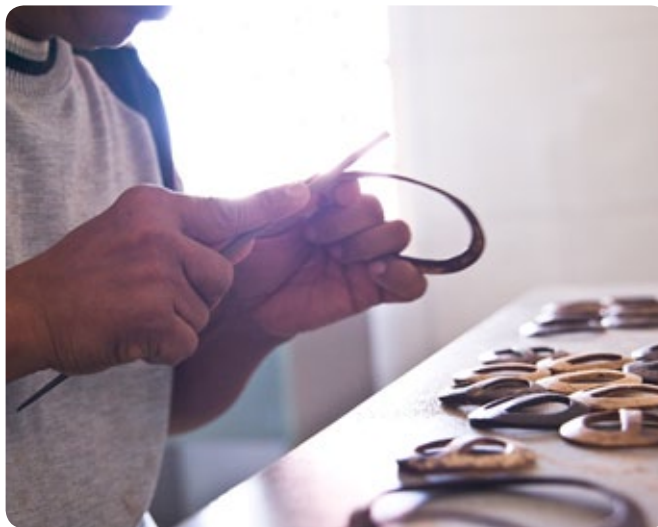
In Cambodia, many little boys are repeatedly sexually abused by tourist pedophiles. They grow up both physically and psychologically damaged and often many struggle with gender confusion. They are relegated to the fringes of Cambodian society which despises and ostracizes them. They are subject to public scorn, beatings and insults which force them to retreat from daylight – many of them only come out late at night. They are rejected by their families, devoid of hope, and have few contacts other than with those who continue to abuse them. They represent, for me, lives of almost complete dislocation and despair. I don't know about you but I find such circumstances completely overwhelming. How could any hope ever be restored to such lives? Yet I am reminded of Zephaniah 3:16 – 17, *“Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp...”*

Even in such overwhelming circumstances there is hope. While I was doing the interview, a short drive across town there was another young man with an almost identical history of profound abuse and neglect yet his words communicate a very different reality – a reality of hope!

*“Everyone here is like my family. I get to study many different subjects I enjoy. Now I can speak English and I can love. I love God. God helps me every time I have problems. I have God in my heart and I have a new life. Before nobody loved me, now I am loved by many. I am accepted.”*



These words come from a young man who was able to escape the life of systematic sexual abuse by entering the Transition Life Skills Program we fund in Phnom Penh. This dramatic program provides young men with the first opportunity to enter a nurturing community that genuinely cares for them and provides job skills training, access to healthcare, education, counselling, and life skills workshops. For the first time they feel accepted, empowered and hopeful. They are employed at several businesses including a carpentry workshop and a silk-screen printing business.



**Above:** A young man working at the Transition Life Skills Program's carpentry workshop.

All of this occurs in a context of prayer and with dedication to young lives others have thrown away. Slowly but surely lives are transformed as they grow in job skills, self-esteem and in the knowledge of another carpenter who many years ago gave His life for the *“least of these”*. The ‘Carpenter King’, as I often refer to Him, is absolutely not overwhelmed by such circumstances. He is not remotely intimidated by the difficulty of the task at hand for He is in the business of restoring lives that others think are well beyond help. Zephaniah goes on, *“Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with his love...”* Verse 19 even goes on to talk of being given *“honour in every land where they were put to shame”*. What a picture!

The social, psychological and gender confusion issues are immense but Christ is more than capable of rebuilding such lives. It takes determination and courage for the project staff to step into this difficult world to reach those so devastated. It also takes courage and determination for young men to step out of the only life they have ever known. But as an understanding of Christ enters their lives, we see for the first time, stability, confidence and transformation.

Such a transformation is no easy thing but the freedom experienced by these young men leaves me absolutely thrilled and, once again, confident that God can restore even the lives of those so devastated by others. One of the young men now participates in an outreach team that goes back into the nocturnal environments where the young men are still trafficked and abused. He tells them about the Transition Life Skills Program and the freedom to be found in getting to know another carpenter of long ago.

Our hope is that many more young men, devastated by such abuse, and still suffering, would come to know that they are not forgotten but are actually loved and of profound value. Pray for both the young men and staff in the program as they seek to restore those whose hope, dignity and identities were stolen from them at an early age.

## HOPEFUL BIRTHDAYS & A VALENTINE HEART FOR CAMBODIA

More and more, here at Ratanak, we are seeing proof that it is the heart, not always experience, that emboldens us to think of others, consider how to help and do it! Age has certainly not bound our supporters in their creativity and their love for the people of Cambodia. One of our supporters, Sarah Imbeau, is 11 years old. She has been supporting Ratanak for a few years now.

Sarah has asked the guests who came to celebrate her birthday, to bring a donation for Ratanak, instead of a gift for her. These creative means for taking action and supporting Ratanak have not only been carried out on Sarah's birthday. Her creativity carried into this past Valentine's Day. Sarah prepared beautiful Valentine's crafts. A table was arranged at her church and on February 10, 2013, she was able to share her crafts and collect donations in support of Ratanak. At church that day, Sarah also took initiative in raising further awareness about our projects in Cambodia. She shared a brief video about Ratanak.

It is amazing the difference that can be made in the lives of women, precious children, and communities in need, by just one person!

If you are looking for any ideas about how to become even more involved, please feel free to contact us at [info@ratanak.org](mailto:info@ratanak.org). All our supporters, we appreciate your prayers and never cease to be amazed by the initiative and creativity you bring to the mission of Ratanak. Sarah, thank you for your heart and your support, you are an inspiration to us!



Above: Sarah Imbeau and her beautiful Valentine's crafts supporting Ratanak.

*As I close this update, I wish you every blessing throughout 2013. I pray you are encouraged hearing about the lives you are touching with hope, freedom from exploitation, the provision of medical care and full stomachs to face the day. Pray for all the lives we have the privilege of serving today. Pray also for the many we do not yet know that will be brought to us in 2013. They wait, many of them hopeless, not knowing that help is on the way. Thank you all, for you represent that coming hope!*

Blessings,

**Brian McConaghy**

Ratanak



International

BRINGING LIFE TO THE KILLING FIELDS OF CAMBODIA

Box 81038, Burnaby, BC V5H 4K1 Canada Phone: 604-325-9300 [www.ratanak.org](http://www.ratanak.org)