

## The Gift of Education - Library Opening



Several weeks ago, in mid-November, we went to Siem Reap for the formal opening of the Community Library Center. The demand for this facility has been so great that it became operational months before the formal opening we attended.

This is an amazing facility designed to support the educational and recreational needs of rural children in a non-threatening Christian context. The nearby schools (with 8000 students!) have few resources and the quality of education is poor. The library provides tutoring and opportunity to read a growing assortment of books. After-school sports programs also feature prominently in the day-to-day activity of the center which provides positive role-modeling to the local youth. These programs are run by Christian university graduates who themselves were funded in part by Ratanak International for their tuition etc. This center represents the first rural library to be established in Cambodia after the revolution when all libraries were destroyed and teachers executed. It also is the first and only library in Cambodia to have live Internet connection through a satellite link.

What a wonderful thing it was to see kids that would, under normal circumstances, remain largely uneducated, isolated and vulnerable learning and interacting with the larger world.



*Library opening ceremonies.*

As we assembled for the opening it became obvious that it was a pretty big deal even for those outside the community. About 300 were in attendance for the opening. There were speeches from the Provincial Governor and senior government officials from the capitol. But the most encouraging thing was the participation of the community. At first I thought a professional company had been employed to perform traditional dance for the opening ceremony. I was later to discover that the beautiful and poised dancers were local kids who use the library daily and had asked to dance in celebration of the opening. What a joy to see kids desiring to celebrate the gift of education in this way. The formalities were followed by food and "street" hockey games – a hugely popular recreation introduced by the Canadian-Cambodian director, Reaksa Himm.

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The following day we returned to the library just to see what it looks like on a normal day. We were confronted by a group of kids who were absolutely inhaling the books provided. One little girl had her nose pressed into a book and was reading aloud. She was so focused she barely looked up at us. It caused me to reflect on how much we in the West take books for granted. We then moved to the computer area to find several



*New Library with excited new users.*

groups of kids chatting in English on Facebook! The quality of their English was astonishing and I was amazed by how connected they were. We chatted and discussed the computers together and then, all too soon, it was time to

leave. As we exited the building and piled into the back of the truck we passed the same little girl, still focused and still reading aloud, oblivious to all around. We waved good-bye to the computer kids who had followed us out. They responded with calls of, "We'll see you on Facebook!" How small the world has become!

***Svay Pak Chaos***

Several years ago we introduced the Sanctuary building to you. A large structure originally intended to be a child brothel/ pedophile hotel. It was taken over and refurbished into a clinic, school and church. On a recent visit I was struck again by the noise, bustle and apparent chaos of the place. It was a joy to see so many in the community being served, helped, taught and blessed. Don't get me wrong, this is no easy place. While visiting medical/dental teams worked, the kids' club danced and sang, the cartoons played, the computer training progressed and people were prayed for, the pedophile predators were outside hunting for victims - only feet away from the kids club. Death threats are still issued and the student leaders live in

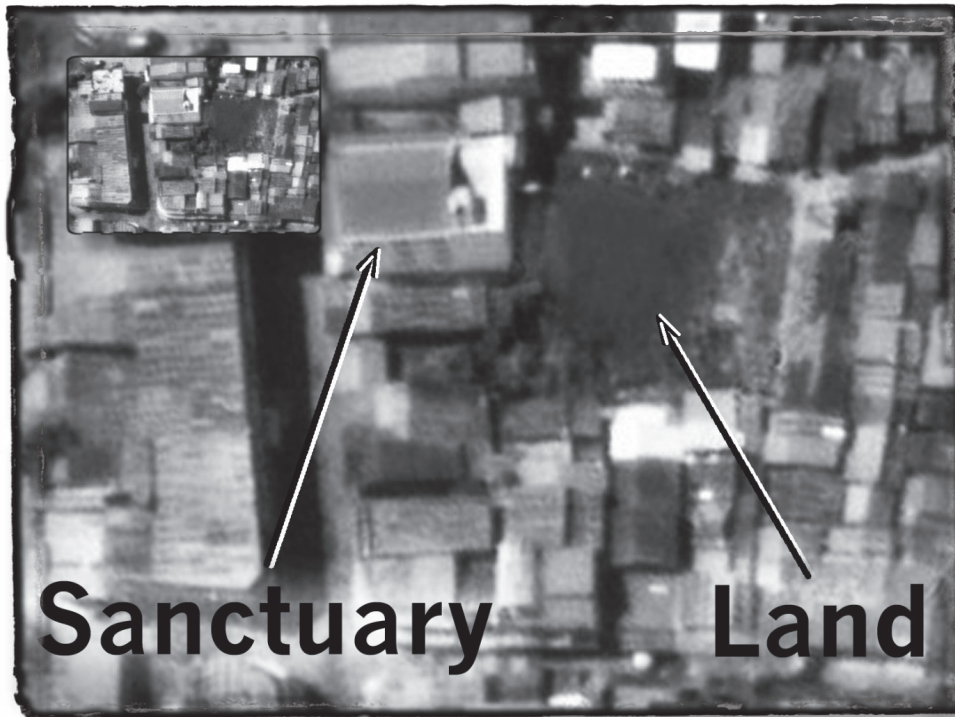
fear. But this should be no surprise for it is in a context of adversity that we see the gospel in its most powerful form. (Freedom is always understood with the most clarity from the position of slavery!) We are witnessing the transformation of a community but it is happening in

a very difficult context. Pray for the safety and blessing of all those who work in and from the Sanctuary building, that they would be refreshed, emboldened and encouraged in their service to this difficult place.

***Location. Location. Location***

We at Ratanak are very excited about a new opportunity to buy property in Cambodia. It is not a property that would normally generate excitement, but it does for us. It is not beautiful, or fertile. It is neither developed





nor functional, at this point. It is however waterfront property... well, sort of. You see, we are currently excited to be in the process of buying an 82'x 82' plot of land that is basically 6,728 square feet of liquid sewage! It is an empty lot in amongst the brothels and shanties where drainage and garbage collect and rot. When animals run across it the whole surface moves as the semi-liquid substance under the weeds wobbles. It is not a place for the squeamish or those sensitive to smell.

So why the excitement? In the district of Svay Pak there is no available land. All lots are spoken for or have been built on – except this one which happens to be right out the back door of our Sanctuary building. Our large building serves over 500 people a day through all sorts of medical, educational and church programs. It is in so many ways a “sanctuary” for the children and youth of this community. Even at night many youth who have



become the church leadership team sleep on the floor of the Sanctuary. They have become homeless as a result of their refusal to participate in the brothel industry. (We are in the process of installing new security gates in the front of the building to better protect the young people inside who are frequently threatened at night – this is the front line in the war on child sex slavery and human trafficking.)

The Sanctuary building takes up the full size of the lot which allows for no expansion or storage areas. We currently don't even have space for the electric generator which currently lives in a rented building across the street. The many kids'

programs all operate inside. We would love to have them play safely outside but we have never had space. Often we have thought about how wonderful it would be to simply have more room. Who would have thought that having a lot full of sewage and garbage right outside our back door would have been a blessing! Well it is. For here we have an area which can be annexed onto the building property and is, on account of the filth, available for less than 50% of the normal land value. It will take some considerable draining and cleaning but it is available to us in a location that could not be more perfect. We are currently in negotiations to buy this property. Recently I showed our “prize lot” to a team from Ratanak UK and Ratanak Australia. As we watched a dog cross its moving surface a comment was made... “Well, that is what Ratanak is all about – taking what is disgusting and making it clean, lovely and useful”. Couldn't have said it better myself!

*Student Dorm in Mondulkiri*

Recently Ratanak partnered with the CAMA Services (Christian & Missionary Alliance development wing) and the local churches in the northeastern province of Mondulkiri to build student dorms for kids in distant rural communities. These are kids who cannot commute to school and who, without an education, are vulnerable to human trafficking and abuse. Local churches provided free labour for



the construction of the dorm building in order to keep costs down. This program will provide students with free accommodation while they study at one of the local government schools. Student rent will be paid, not in cash, but in labour as they work with the adjacent CAMA sustainable-agricultural training facility. This will accomplish several goals. Students will be able to obtain an education while they support

*BELOW: New Dorm under construction.*



CAMA's agricultural development center. They will gain sustainable-agricultural skills to take back to their village and they will live and work alongside Christians modeling compassion, and dedication to bettering the community. It is a win-win situation for all concerned.

### *News in brief..*

#### **Trials in the US**

Please remember to pray for several young Cambodians in our programs who will be testifying against their abusers in US courts in January and March. The trials are very traumatizing events for these kids and your prayers would be valued as they prepare to face their abusers.

#### **Staying in contact**

Remember Ratanak has a Facebook group called "Ratanak International" and a twitter account "Ratanakint" to help keep you connected with us. Please do join us there for latest news updates and dialogue.

**T**hanks once again for all you support and encouragement through 2011. It has been an exciting year and we are glad that you have been on the journey with us as we continued to bring hope to Cambodians. We wish you every blessing over the Christmas season and into the New Year.

Brian McConaghy

*As you finish this newsletter we would encourage you to pray for this young man making use of the new library.*



Ratanak



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**BRINGING LIFE TO THE KILLING FIELDS OF CAMBODIA**

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