

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.

## Unforseen Blessings

Christmas 2013

### AN UNEXPECTED GIFT - RAP



The Ratanak Achievement Program (RAP) is a home where girls who have suffered much abuse and have successfully completed the long process of rehabilitation can come to be further cared for and taught life skills. In this environment they are introduced to the challenges of reintegrating back into a society that is neither gentle nor encouraging. It is difficult to move forward with confidence and a healthy self-esteem after all they've been through.

When we set this program up, we planned for everything...well, almost everything. One of the things we had not expected was a baby! If anything has become clear through our experiences with RAP, it has been the need for flexibility. This became even more of a reality when one of our young women became pregnant. In the interests of protecting her privacy we can't get into the circumstances of her pregnancy, safe to say it represents just one more hurdle for her to overcome as she re-enters society. However, with her permission, we can share a little about

the most recent addition to the RAP community home.

At first the staff were not sure how to manage the prospect of a baby in the home. This is an environment designed for the nurturing of girls and young women with tragic pasts. Everything within the program focuses on their wellbeing and equipping them for independent life. What impact would a baby have on the whole program? How could we maintain our focus on the girls with the additional responsibility of caring for an infant? Irrespective of our concerns, our commitment to the mother-to-be was absolutely unshakeable. The baby was coming and we would need to prepare. In mid October, we had the privilege of welcoming little baby Ratanak Daniel into our "RAP Family," weighing in at 6 pounds, 1 ounce. The names given to this little boy are significant. Ratanak, in addition to being the name of our organization, means "Precious Gem" in Khmer, and Daniel was a great man of integrity. It seems so appropriate that God gave these names to his mother. Indeed, he is a precious gem of God created for a purpose and our hope is that he will live in God's ways and truth wholeheartedly in spite of societal pressures, just like Daniel. While the RAP home was not designed for infants, God obviously had other plans.

We are learning much about God's grace and redemptive power through Daniel's birth and the remarkable courage of his mother, who is going against cultural norms by having a baby. In this culture,



*Above: Daniel Ratanak sleeps soundly at the RAP home under the care of his mother and her helpers!*

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young, pregnant, unwed mothers so often have to deal with shame and the stigma associated with having a baby outside of marriage. Srey Neth's (not her real name) incredible poise and maturity during this time continues to amaze the staff despite her young age. During her pregnancy, she ate all the right food to ensure that her baby was getting the appropriate nutrients. She talked about her future with her son and shared about what she would like to do. In this process she exhibited the traits of maturity, care, planning and diligence that are exactly what we want the girls in RAP to see and apply to their own lives. One week after giving birth she said to some of our young women and staff, "I would like Daniel to go church this morning. I would like him to know God." She asked if she could join as well and, of course, we were delighted to have her go despite the fact she was feeling a bit weak and sore from the delivery.

This brings to mind another brave young girl over two thousand years ago who gave birth to a child under far from ideal circumstances. In so many ways we have domesticated the Christmas story to make it comfortable, palatable and even cute. But we should never lose sight of the fact that this was extremely difficult – physically, socially and culturally. Yet God had a plan that completely eclipsed the physical realities of poverty and shame.

As for the other girls at RAP, we have witnessed the love of God manifested in a whole new way as they and the staff seek to care for this little baby as well as his mother. Two of our young women, along with one of our home advisors, were with Srey Neth as the delivery was imminent. They stayed overnight at the hospital praying for her and the baby. The doctor was so impressed that he said to them, "Your God is good," because Srey Neth's delivery was so smooth and short (only 6 hours). These two helpers took turns assisting Sery Neth in the hospital when she needed to go to the bathroom, and enjoyed feeding and changing diapers under the watchful eye of our home advisors.

Both our staff and young women at the RAP home have demonstrated that "divine interruptions" are usually a summons to servanthood – not convenience, ease, wealth or power. The Lord has interrupted our lives with this beautiful little bundle. We see the servant hearts of our young women as they volunteer to wash the baby's clothes and those of Srey Neth. We see them willingly volunteering to clean diapers and take him for little walks around the RAP home so his mother can rest. Indeed, through this divine interruption, we see tenderness, nurturing, sacrifice, thoughtfulness and most of all, love coming from our young women. In their own life experiences they have not received such love and care, yet their actions show again that the

Lord has built into each one of us the capacity to love and care despite whatever trauma or brokenness we may have experienced. In the end, as God would plan it, the arrival of this child has proved to be a huge blessing to the mother and to all those in the RAP program

The birth of Jesus ushered in a whole new dimension of love, of peace and of joy on an eternal scale. His birth too was a divine interruption – an interruption that changed the course of history. His birth made a way for us all to receive salvation and eternal life. This year we have our own illustration of Christmas as we see a little baby interrupt our lives and bring hope, joy, unity and love to those who so desperately need it.

### **HOLDING OUR BREATH – ANOTHER DAM**

Back in mid -2011 Brian was up in Siem Reap near the great historic ruins of Angkor Wat when he was approached by desperate government officials seeking help to build a dam and dyke system in attempts to control flooding, which had repeatedly devastated homes, livestock and crops. This had gone on for several years as extreme weather patterns repeated the destruction each season. There was much hopelessness and despair. In response, Ratanak funded the construction project with the understanding that the local population would participate in the actual physical labor of building. Our desire was that these communities would not see themselves as charity cases, but rather know the pride of helping solve their own problems. The project was an amazing success, protecting the homes and livelihoods of 20,000 people after its completion.

In January of 2013 Brian was once again out in this area. The governor of the area, district leaders and village chiefs met Brian upon arrival and expressed their thanks, demonstrating real



pride in the irrigation system they had built. Most touching were the stories from the local village chiefs. These weathered, dark and wiry men had known much hardship and trauma in their lives and encountered very little compassion or help in the struggle to bring hope to their villages. It wasn't long before the inevitable happened...a request for more help. Often when dealing with government officials this can simply be a play for money, but our trust level with this group was growing, and so Brian graciously received the proposal for another dam.



no social safety net, no government assistance programs, and nothing to fall back on, such a program can mean the difference between life and death for many. Once again, Ratanak has been privileged to come alongside the Cambodian people in bringing compassion and the preservation of life.

**Before:** Those living in the area had done their best with available resources to put up a makeshift dam. However, it hadn't held the previous season's floods. (Left)

**During:** Construction of the new dam just before the flooding. (Below-left)

**After:** The completed structure, successfully holding back the large volume of water from this year's seasonal flooding. (Below-right)



Brian recounts, "Time was short. The rainy season would be upon us in less than six months and there was a measure of desperation in the request. We went out to visit the site of the current 'dam'. It was moving to see how these poor people had been desperately, and unsuccessfully, trying to stem the flood of the previous season using wood and tarpaulins under a small road bridge. My heart went out to them."

As rapidly as possible, plans were drawn up, the project was assessed and we agreed to fund and move forward. Building got going at breakneck speed in a five-month race against the seasons. The construction was still ongoing in August as the waters rose. By the beginning of September the main building was completed, and by October unprecedented water levels submerged the entire dam except for the top six inches and the flood control gate structures. No one had ever seen flood levels this high and the dam and irrigation system was not designed for this. If the water crossed over the top of the dykes, all would be lost. Sand bagging was not an option as they did not possess the quantity of sandbags required – large stocks of sandbags are a luxury of the developed West! We held our breath, inspected for breaches hourly, waited and prayed.

By mid-October the water was receding, the system had held and we could breathe once again. While nerve wracking, this has been a wonderful project where, once again, many thousands of families were kept safe and their ability to farm (and thus eat) was preserved. In a country like Cambodia where there is

## SWEET OPPORTUNITIES – A NEW CAKE SHOP

We recently funded the opening of a cake shop and café – a new project for Ratanak that provides women who are rebuilding their lives after years of trauma with amazing opportunities. I recently had the privilege of visiting the cake shop. Their "edible art," as they like to call their cakes and cupcakes, are not only delicious – they truly are works of art! The brightly colored frosting is beautifully and meticulously embellished with candy, chocolate, and fondant shaped into delicate flowers. Small businesses like this serve as training grounds for women who have been trapped in situations of sexual exploitation to develop important vocational skills. Not only do they empower them with employable skills, but they also build self-confidence and are rewarded with a sense of accomplishment as they see the fruits of their labor in both tangible and intangible successes – a beautiful cake, the satisfied smile of a customer, a crowded café. This cake shop also provides holistic care in the form of counseling, spiritual support, and medical care, and seeks to work alongside each young woman in their journey towards restoration and recovery. Working in a crowded and public café means that each day is a new adventure, with different customers to appease and



different lessons to learn. It is so encouraging to see these young women growing, overcoming challenges and learning new skills. They remind us of how God can bring restoration to lives that have been devastated by the world as they experience the joys of dreaming, reach their goals and realize their full potential.

## NEWSONG COMES OF AGE

In early 2004, Brian flew to California to meet a couple that had been greatly impacted by the plight of young children sold into sex slavery in Cambodia. They had ideas to open a high security rehabilitation center for kids rescued from the brothels. They did not, however, have the resources to make their dream a reality. Upon evaluation, it was clear that their ideas were well thought out, their plans very viable. On that basis, Brian agreed to a partnership and committed the first \$50,000 to what would become NewSong Centre. Over the years, Ratanak maintained extensive funding of NewSong while the ministry grew and other funders came alongside to share the increasing budget. At the same time, NewSong staff were requesting assistance with a reintegration process for NewSong “graduates” who needed to transition back into society. NewSong staff indicated they couldn’t manage this additional burden and suggested that Ratanak develop such a program. After two years of planning, that program became the Ratanak Achievement Program (RAP). Coinciding with this came the realization that NewSong had developed a stable and adequate funding base that no longer required direct Ratanak support. In consultation with NewSong staff, we felt it was best to refocus our attention on the area where we are developing particular expertise – the reintegration process. So as of January 2014, Ratanak will not longer directly fund NewSong. We will, however, be continuing a close relationship with the girls of NewSong by accepting them into RAP for continued care as they graduate. In addition, we will continue to support our dear friends in NewSong through sporadic capital project funding where needed. Please pray for NewSong as the dream of years ago operates as an independent and thriving ministry. We are thrilled to have been a big part of this journey!



## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Opening Doors

Ratanak is well known to the Canadian Government and we are privileged to have much favor from those who become aware of the quality of our work. On occasion, doors open that are not expected. Recently, Brian was asked by the Federal Government to represent Canada and make a presentation to a symposium of senior policy advisors from G8 nations in London. The task was to establish and recommend policy priorities for law enforcement associated with international child protection. It is a privilege for Ratanak, as a small Christian organization, to be recognized in this way. It is also a thrill to represent the lost youth of Cambodia at such a table. Please continue to pray for wisdom for Brian as he navigates such meetings for the blessing of children with no voice.

### Ride for Refuge

We were blown away by all the support that poured in the last few weeks leading up to Ride for Refuge! It is so encouraging to see people passionate about issues that so many in Cambodia are faced with regularly. We surpassed our goal of \$100,000 and raised over \$129,000 towards our child exploitation prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration programs! Thanks to everyone who participated, either through cycling, raising awareness, donating, or keeping us in your prayers.

### Restoring Joy

This Christmas, honor someone special in your life while helping restore joy and hope to those in situations of exploitation or abuse by donating to Ratanak International. We will acknowledge your donation by sending a personalized Christmas card and one small ornament (fair-trade and hand-made in Cambodia) to the person you are giving in honor of. Visit [www.ratanak.org](http://www.ratanak.org) to give.

*Thank you for supporting us as we seek to serve, love, and show compassion to those in need. On behalf of our staff in Canada and Cambodia, I would like to wish you and your families a blessed Christmas! I hope you are encouraged by how God is weaving together these beautiful stories of hope and restoration in the lives of His precious children in Cambodia.*

*Blessings,*

**Brian McConaghy**

Ratanak



International

BRINGING LIFE TO THE KILLING FIELDS OF CAMBODIA

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