

Commentary...

Capturing Cambodia in missionary work

By **Cody Rheault**
Correspondent

My second time to Cambodia I was welcomed with a lecture about avoiding the voluptuous prostitute.

Apparently the streets of Takeo, Cambodia where we were staying, were a trap for tourists. Traveling alone was not an option. A talk of that sort isn't a welcome you would expect on day one of a two-and-a-half week mission trip to southern Cambodia. As it turns out, the human and sex trafficking trade would play a part in our purpose there.

For those two and a half weeks in January, I was part of a 37-man crew with the Men Of Vision Evangelize organization. Dedicated to building churches and ministry structures around the world, M.O.V.E. has been in operation for more than 50 years. Taking men from around the States, these ministry trips focus on providing local organizations with the funds and resources to construct a building to suit their needs. Many of these places can't afford the cost and lack the manpower, but M.O.V.E. provides these resources and changes the lives of the men on the team through brotherhood and camaraderie.

This was my third time abroad with the group. Serving as the man in charge of documenting the trip through images, videos, and words it's my job to observe the progress as it happens and capture it.

Three hours south of Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, lies a small mission base inside a remote village. Lyhoung and Sarin Mak are native Cambodians — survivors of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in the late

1970s — who returned to their country after fleeing to the United States and living the last 30 years in Iowa. For the past four years they have built and run what has become essentially an oasis of hope within their small community.

Providing education to preschool-aged children and feeding the local kids at no cost are a few ways Lyhoung has slowly begun to change his village. It wasn't until his return to Cambodia in 2011 that he began to see a deeper crisis within his culture.



The site of M.O.V.E.'s project

Cambodia is the second-poorest country in Southeast Asia, with an average monthly income of only \$180. Poverty is the status quo in Cambodia and fosters an environment of desperate acts done for money. Lyhoung shared with me that many families will send off their young children — sometimes as young as 14 — to work in government factories in the capital. Expected to send money home regularly, these kids find themselves pressured into working long days for little pay.

For the capable but susceptible unskilled girls, this often means finding other ways of earning money. If they weren't already lured into the sex trade with promises of a cushy factory job, many of these young girls find their cash on the streets at night, working as prostitutes.

While the occupation is hardly new, many girls —

large number underaged — have fallen into a rampant industry that Cambodia has failed to control. Extreme stories emerge of parents selling their children into trafficking for quick and easy cash to feed the rest of the family. And the country has seen an unskilled population become the victims of the needs of tonight.

Lyhoung saw this and it broke his heart, he said.

"I see these people, these children, and they have nowhere to go, nothing to do," he told me.

Inevitably, the young generation has fallen into trafficking or drugs.

In the fall of last year, Lyhoung and Sarin broke ground on what he prays will change the destiny of families and children in Cambodia. With funds provided through

Open Bible Churches and private donors, he is seeing his dream of a vocational education center come to life. With the intention of teaching



Helping Cambodia's vulnerable children is a focus of mission work.

PHOTO BY CODY RHEAULT

computer and sewing classes, he hopes that education in skills will keep more kids off the streets and more parents able to support their families.

M.O.V.E. heard of the need and gathered 37 men to help build the first phase of the building. That first phase included constructing forms and pouring concrete beams as well as an entire second floor. The bottom floor will contain two classrooms outfitted with computers and sewing machines, and the top floor divided into a dormitory set up to house people taking classes.

In 11 days, our job was completed. Pouring concrete late into the night of our last day we accomplished a portion Lyhoung couldn't do himself or with help in that amount of time. We were humbled by his vision and

desire to change a country through such palpable means. The need among the community was visible and served as a constant reminder of the deeper meaning of our visit.

Some 2,000 images and a hard drive full of footage later, I have a lot of work ahead of me to tell the stories of our time in Cambodia. But for me, more than anything, the trip was a reflection of the blessings we have here in the States. While traveling the world is a favorite occupation of mine, I still call Sisters my home and our country a place I'm proud to be a part of. When things get tough, I look back to places like Cambodia and the people I met there. They remind me of the opportunity we have here as well as the ability to become who and what we want to be.



M.O.V.E. is working on an education center in Cambodia

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