

Cambodian exchange seeks to empower through education

by Marc Speir

More than a quarter of a century has passed since the Khmer Rouge slaughtered 1.7 million of Cambodia's 7.5 million people through executions, forced labor and starvation. The ultimate goal of the communist regime was to create an agrarian culture run by peasants, presumably free of class and foreign influence. As ruling political party of Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, the communist movement imposed an extreme socialist order on Cambodian society by arresting, torturing and eliminating those suspected of undermining the cause.

It declared a new calendar in 1975 and marked it "year zero." It scattered the citizens of urban cities and forced them into slave labor on collective farms in rural settings. It killed foreigners, doctors, business people and teachers. It eradicated religious practice, annulled the banking system and closed schools.

Among those persecuted in Cambodia were professionals, intellectuals and students. By government decree, this included almost everyone traced to a formal education and even those wearing glasses, which, according to the government, meant that they were literate.

While the regime fell in 1979 and its claims to any dwindling power eroded in the late 1990s amidst a fierce and elongated civil war, remnants of the Khmer Rouge persist in the form of present-day United Nations war crimes trials and the demographics of a country that remains highly uneducated.

The current-day Cambodia of 14.8 million citizens is rooted in a strong youth culture with only one-fourth of the Cambodian population left to remember the atrocities of the late 1970s. The average age is 20, and the literacy rate for adults hovers around 70 percent. This leaves the rising generation of Cambodians looking toward the future, a future desperately in need of foreign aid.

While on vacation in Southeast Asia, Ken and Verena Wilson of Austin saw the area struggling to realize its own potential and finally break out of its oppressive past.

"We were unaware of the continuing effects of the Khmer Rouge," Ken Wilson said. "Everything from education to business faltered in a matter of months (of Pol Pot's rule), and it all came to a standstill, one that it's finally beginning to wake up from."



Photo by Javier Mere Prado



Photo by Anthony Mrugacz



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Sympathizing with the incredible lack of infrastructure and opportunity for Cambodians to realize a higher education, the Wilsons felt compelled to do something for an area of the world that was losing hope for a brighter tomorrow.

Ken Wilson (Class of '65), former vice president of the biotechnology firm ABI Corp., says he wants to help alleviate the region's need for modern services in areas such as education, health care, urban planning and clean water.

In response, he and his wife Verena established the Wilson Asian Faculty and Student Exchange Program in Texas State's Center for International Studies to help reverse the grinding halt of progress in Cambodia.

The Wilsons' gift will support faculty and student exchange projects between Texas State and Cambodia and other nations for the next 20 years. Designed to foster the development of both Texas State and foreign faculty and students, the exchange program is devoted to modernizing developing nations like Cambodia.

"There has been an active attempt to restart the educational system over the past 20 years, but a strata of educated Cambodians from one to two generations ago is missing," Wilson said. "All around them, the Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese are filling in and running businesses in Cambodia that should be run by Cambodians."

In its first year of operation, the exchange program is in the midst of building relationships with schools, non-government and government organizations and finding appropriate avenues to assist the Cambodian people. Last spring, a team of faculty and administrators from Texas State's colleges of Science, Liberal Arts, and Health Professions embarked on a short visit to Cambodia to assess the country's needs and establish priorities.

"The Cambodian people are building from ground zero," said Dennis Dunn, facilitator of the program and director of the Center for International Studies at Texas State. "The people there are trying to reinvent themselves."

Dunn maintains that the program will provide major international support to advancing nations, especially in Cambodia,

which is friendly to the United States. "They're incredibly pro-American right now," Dunn said. "Remember when Bush was applauded in Albania? If he went to Cambodia, they'd probably kiss his feet."

As the first long-term ambassadors of the program, three graduate students — Anthony Mrugacz, Javier Mere Prado and Tanya Rogers — were sent to Cambodia this summer and assigned the task of

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teaching English to Cambodian students. Since English is known as the international language of business, it's considered an essential skill in Asian countries.

"There are 35,000 students actively taking Chinese language classes in the U.S.," Wilson said. "There are 250 million Chinese taking English language classes. Everyone in Cambodia wants to learn it."

Mrugacz and Prado taught language courses at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, a multi-faceted university that Wilson says resembles Texas State. "They are a full university with graduate programs," Wilson said. "The Royal University also started out as a teachers' college, much like Texas State, and currently has the responsibility to educate all secondary school teachers for the country."

Prado, also a member of the Texas State track team from Queretaro, Mexico, says that Cambodians are extremely polite and are surviving one day at a time. "I noticed that what we take for granted — education, pure water, food — for them is a privilege," Prado said. "Students see learning English as their gateway to the outside world and to the possibility of finding better jobs."

Mrugacz, an international traveler originally from Cleveland, says that he learned the importance of education and the need to develop the critical thinking skills in the next generation of young Cambodians. Compared to similar outreach efforts, he

asserts that the university's approach is more effective.

"The bureaucracy that involves the United Nations or NGOs [non-government organizations] can't adapt as fast or make critical decisions as well as a university program," Mrugacz said. He added that the modernization of Cambodia has a long way to go, explaining that while at a new mall in Phnom Penh, his Cambodian friend refused to ride on an escalator because he had never seen one.

"One day I showed my students a compass, and only one of 56 knew what it was," Mrugacz said. "Geography skills among the populace are non-existent. Not one Cambodian knows where Texas is, but they have heard of the U.S.A. They pronounce it 'You-ess-ess-ay.'"

Rogers taught English in technical terms at the University of Health Sciences, Cambodia's only college of medical and pharmaceutical sciences, also in the nation's capital of Phnom Penh. She says learning the English language gives Cambodians the opportunity to strengthen investment in their country. "It provides a useful service that will help them in the future," Rogers said. "Twenty percent of the country's economy is based on tourism, so many Cambodians feel that English will help them either find jobs or get promotions."

The 41-year-old native of London also used her visit as an opportunity to reach out to other international groups. "I'm working to establish contacts and gather information about various NGOs in the area for possible internships in the future," she said.

The discovery of oil, advocacy of international micro-loans to small businesses and the launch of a first-time ever Peace Corps station in Cambodia all point to progress in the region. Nevertheless, Wilson says there's much left to improve upon.

"These things wouldn't be going on without foreign influence," Wilson said. "We're hoping we get others invested in our program because our faculty and our kids can do some great things over there."

The program is currently evaluating other needs within Cambodia and the possible expansion of exchange projects in neighboring Laos. ★