

"Love is locked in these lost eyes. Love is lost in these cold eyes. And in these wounds too raw to touch. Ashes, ashes, dust to dust. Take these hands of flesh and bone, reaching out for love. In these dreams that lie in rust. Ashes, ashes, dust to dust. Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, out of the dust reach tiny hands. . . Lyrics from Dust by Mr. Mister



Out of the Dust... Comes Hope

Nearly 30 Years of Aftermath of Cambodian Genocide Prompts Belmont University Nursing Instructor and Her Students to Bestow Hope and Healing

A Partnership of Hope: Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE, Phnom Penh and Belmont University School of Nursing Join Forces to Help Cambodia's Indigent

In the nearly 30 year aftermath of the rule of an evil, Communist regime that parallels the Nazi Holocaust, the people of Cambodia have grasped for glimmers of hope in a culture wrought with corruption, poverty, sickness and death. Following is a small nugget of a greater story of hope for Cambodia's destitute. The individual stories and images are remarkable.



(Top) Cambodian children at play in Phnom Penh where the BU team stayed in 2005.

(Below) Belmont University (BU) nursing students distributed school supplies to school-aged children in a small province of Cambodia (Mean Chay) during their trip in 2005.

Cambodia Today

Cambodia is a country marred by its painful past—and under reconstruction. What’s left is a starving, confused, largely uneducated population that lacks knowledge, wisdom and resources to rebuild the kind of infrastructure that most of us take for granted.

Today, nearly half the population survives by subsistence farming and suffers from malnutrition. Untreated childhood sicknesses have resulted in widespread chronic diseases, preventing many people from working, sentencing them to a life of poverty. In Cambodia, only .58 doctors exist per 1,000 people—compared to 2.4 doctors per 1,000 people in the United States. Life expectancy is 59 years old.

While the Cambodian government has re-established hospitals, the cost of treatment is out of reach for the majority of people, sometimes costing a family in excess of a year’s salary. Many people have resorted to using all of their scant savings or selling their homes and possessions to pay for below standard, often ineffective diagnoses and treatment at government-run hospitals. In the past, those requiring complex forms of surgery often died for lack of affordable, quality treatment; or if they could afford it, had surgery at one of the government hospitals where outcomes are questionable. Only ex-patriots—or rare cases requiring special surgical treatment who are “sponsored” by an organization—can afford to go to Bangkok to have an operation, which is hundreds of miles away, and rarely feasible due to language and other barriers. But now there is “HOPE.

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After hearing of the horror and devastation of the Khmer Rouge “holocaust” while in high school, Susan Taplin, (see photo at right) Belmont University (BU) alumna and current clinical instructor of Belmont University’s School of Nursing (Nashville, Tennessee) was moved to one day visit Cambodia. That dream became a reality in 2005 when Susan, having completed her master’s degree as a family nurse practitioner at Belmont, was hired as director of nursing at the Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope in Phnom Penh, a non-government organization (NGO) hospital that since its inception 10 years ago, has served over 3/4 of a million people throughout Cambodia via 24-hour, high-quality health care and further education and clinical training for medical professionals. Her husband Chas filled the hospital’s need for a chief administrative officer.

At Sihanouk, a mixed staff of nationals—Cambodian medical professionals who’ve graduated with degrees in medicine—and qualified doctors and nurses from developed countries around the world are helping to break the cycle of poverty and disease by providing medical care for many Cambodians who have nowhere else to go. Some travel hundreds of miles through difficult terrain with the hope of being treated; some arrive on the brink of death to be revived, while scores of others come with an injury or disease that prevent them from being self-sufficient. At Sihanouk, they are given a new lease on life.



(Top) Susan with Cambodian interpreter at Sihanouk. (2006)

(Below) Belmont University nursing student holds a child in the neighborhood of one of the communities in which they did “home visits” to families of AIDS patients who are treated at the Sihanouk AIDS hospice. (2006)



Susan, third from the left, with her two sons and her Cambodian friends in a cloud covering on top of Phnom Penh. (2006)

After two years of directing nursing care for the patients at Sihanouk’s medical and surgical wards, the emergency department, the outpatient clinic, the operating room and the AIDS hospice—among them orphans and other children whose families live off the “dump” (a mountain of trash) and many HIV-infected Cambodians—Susan returned to the U.S. more determined than ever to bring back to Sihanouk groups of nursing students who could deliver more advanced medical training and technology to help teach, train and care for Cambodia’s suffering.

At Belmont University, she found those students—and they were eager to learn and to help. And in turn, Susan reasoned, BU students could gain an invaluable education in service, skills development, cultural immersion and love.

In 2005, Susan and Sharon Dowdy, assistant professor at Belmont’s School of Nursing, organized the first team of Belmont University students to visit the hospital as part of an elective, international clinical course while Susan was in residence there. They went again in 2006 and now that Susan has returned to the states, they will take their third Belmont University group of nursing students in May 2007. Susan and Sharon will serve as instructors of the course.

“We are thrilled with how the hospital is improving its care for the people as a result of our influence,” said Susan. “The Belmont nursing students energize us, as well as the staff at Sihanouk. Their enthusiasm and hunger for learning and helping the patients there are gratifying. And the education they receive there is truly extraordinary.” Susan and Sharon concur that with each visit, the team’s skills become

refined, as does the skill-level of the Cambodian medical staff at Sihanouk, thereby improving the degree of care that patients

receive and meeting a more advanced level of need.

The hospital admits patients based on a lottery system—a fair and equitable way to treat non-life threatening cases. Triage at the hospital often handles 300-400 patients a day. More life-threatening cases are given immediate attention and admitted to the ER or the hospital right away.

The Belmont team not only provides much needed nursing care during their visits, but Belmont’s nursing students on their own



A Cambodian man with AIDS is being treated during a “home visit” for severe psoriasis and fungal infection, a skin condition which is worsened with his immuno-suppressed status. He and others like him receive free HIV medicine and AIDS education through Sihanouk’s AIDS hospice. From left to right, a hospital worker, two Belmont University nursing students, Sharon Dowdy, assistant professor at Belmont’s School of Nursing, Susan Taplin, clinical instructor for Belmont (in pink) and a Cambodian social worker. (2006)

A Belmont University student observes an amputation surgery. Many Cambodians are victims of landmine explosions or motorcycle (the chief mode of transportation) accidents and do not receive proper treatment for them. As a result, their wounds heal improperly, causing infection that leads to amputation. (2006)





This Cambodian woman's respiratory rate is being checked by a BU nursing student. The Cambodian woman across the table, Phalla, is admitting the woman into the hospital. She is one of the local education nurses who travels to government hospitals to teach other medical professionals. (2006)

volition have provided support for four teachers in the province (village) for one year; paid for housing for some of the HIV patients in the community where they made home visits; bought and distributed school supplies for school-aged students; and offered clothes to the families living off the “dump”—a mountain of trash in Phnom Penh called Stung Mein Chay off of which some Cambodians live. The Belmont team also left their “scrubs” for hospital use. But while these small gestures have made a big difference, more can be done. For example, the hospital is without air conditioning except for a primitive system in the operating and emergency rooms; and it has no modern ventilators, only hand-operated devices that must be manned round-the-clock to “breathe” for critical patients.

Brief History of Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE, Phnom Penh

The Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE opened its doors ten years ago in 1996 through collaboration between World Mate, Japan Relief for Cambodia, and HOPE Worldwide. It provides high-quality medical care to the people of Cambodia free of charge (the staff is not permitted to accept money for services); and free medical teaching and training to the nationals—Cambodian medical professionals. Sihanouk sees 350+ patients at its clinics everyday, with 1,000 Cambodian doctors and nurses having received free training. It is the most sought after institution in Cambodia for post-graduate education of medical professionals.

Here, (below) the BU nursing students and Sharon Dowdy, associate professor of nursing at Belmont, are on an “AIDS home visit.” The little girl (in pink) and her brother (boy without clothes) are victims of the AIDS epidemic in Cambodia. Their father died of AIDS, leaving their mother who is also infected, to care for her mother and three young children. The boy also has AIDS. The Cambodian social worker in the doorway of the home has arranged for the children’s mother to learn how to make braided bracelets to sell to support the family.



The hut you see in the background is where another AIDS couple lived. The BU team first met them in the AIDS hospice. Both the man and woman had both gone to the hospice to die, but with the free medicine (provided to all who come to the AIDS clinic for the education component), were able to move out of hospice into the community—after getting married! In order to provide a living for themselves, they used a skill they had learned in the hospice—making silk flowers, which are pinned to the nurses’ uniforms in this picture.



(Top) Sharon Dowdy, associate professor of nursing at Belmont's School of Nursing and a BU nursing student walk Cambodia's streets on a home visit. (Below) Sharon, Susan and a BU nursing instructor discuss procedures for the day. (2006)



↑ (Above) This smiling girl lies in the surgical ward of Sihanouk hospital Center of HOPE. Family members provide much of the care, feeding, bathing and meeting patient needs. Here, her family members pose with a BU nursing student. This Belmont student nurse decided to stay a month longer than the rest of her nursing team. During that month, she volunteered in the Phnom Penh school, teaching English to the Cambodian children. The man lying in the bed in the background lost his arm and leg in a minefield accident. (2006)

← (Left) This child lives near the “dump” – a mountain of trash off of which he and other Cambodian families live. He is also part of an “orphanage” where he is sponsored to receive clothing, a place to sleep, food, medical attention from Sihanouk and money to go to school where he learns English and other skills. If the “orphan” children still have families, they are allowed to go back and see them regularly. (2006)



↓ (Bottom Right) Making rounds in the surgical ward, the BU nursing team, directed by Susan Taplin and Sharon Dowdy, reviews the chart of a man who has had orthopedic surgery. (2006)

↑ (Above) A Belmont Student Nurse is greeted warmly at the orphanage in Phnom Penh. (2006)



→ (Right) A BU student checks this man’s vital signs in triage at the hospital. (2006)





Background

The Khmer Rouge, meaning “Red Khmer” in French, was an extremist Communist party that ruled Cambodia—from 1975 to 1979 under its ruthless leader, Pol Pot. In just four years, the regime caused the genocide of an estimated 2 million men, women and children through execution, torture, starvation, forced labor and displacement. In terms of the number of people killed in proportion to the population of the country it ruled—an estimated one third of the population—the regime is one of the most lethal of the 20th century.

By 1975, the U.S. government had withdrawn its troops from Vietnam. Cambodia’s government, plagued by corruption and incompetence, also lost its American military support. Pol Pot took advantage of the opportunity and marched his Khmer Rouge army (composed of teenaged peasant guerrillas) into Phnom Penh and seized control of Cambodia. Pol Pot’s radical experiment to create an agrarian utopian society was an extreme form of peasant Communism designed to extinguish capitalism, Western culture, city life, religion and all foreign influences through “purification.” Millions of Cambodians accustomed to city life were forced into slave labor in Pol Pot’s “killing fields” where they soon began dying from overwork, malnutrition and disease.

Throughout Cambodia, deadly purges were conducted to eliminate remnants of the “old society” – the educated, the wealthy, Buddhist monks, police, doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers and former government officials. Communication with the outside world was eliminated; family relationships were dismantled. Even ex-soldiers were killed along with their wives and children. Khmer Rouge’s motto was “What is rotten must be removed. To keep you is no benefit. To destroy you is no loss.”

After four years of brutal rule, the Khmer Rouge regime was removed from power in 1979 as a result of an invasion by Vietnam. But the devastation would be perpetual.