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EMPOWERING A NEW GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS IN CAMBODIA
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LEADERS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD



Red, White, and Bamboo

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The chief of Tramung Chrum is a small, white-haired man of about sixty with a crinkled face and a quiet dignity. When my family and I arrived at his remote village last week for the inauguration of their first brick-and-mortar school, he broke out in a huge grin and said (in Khmer through an interpreter) "I feel like a hunter who has just captured an elephant."

Tramung Chrum is a Cambodian village of about five hundred people, forty miles from Phnom Penh. Because the village is far from a good road and made up of Muslim Chams in a largely Buddhist country, the Cambodian government has never built a school there. Generations have passed without reading and writing. The history of the village extends back at least as far as the mid nineteenth century, during the beginnings of the French occupation.

Four years ago, a former resident of the village named Leb Ke rode his moped to the UN office in Phnom Penh and announced that the villagers wanted a school. They had built a roof of palm leaves and now requested the rest of a school to hold the roof up. A visionary Cambodian UN worker named Veasna Chea eventually relayed Leb Ke's plea to a visionary visitor from Maine named Frederick Lipp. Mr. Lipp in turn funded the building of a temporary school made of sticks and palm leaves. Teachers were trained and the first classes began.

But the school of sticks and leaves leaked during the monsoons and blew down entirely in heavy winds. Two years ago, Lipp told me of his work. I began making trips to the village. Then, with the contributions of other friends, we built the new school for Tramung Chrum.

Cambodia desperately depends on such help to survive. One of the poorest countries in southeast Asia, with an average annual income of only \$300 per person, the Cambodia still has not recovered from the devastation of the 1970s. In the early part of that decade, the U.S. dropped 500,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia, the finale of the Vietnam War, and propped up the corrupt dictatorship of Lon Nol. Then came the ruthless Khmer Rouge regime, which sent two million people to their deaths. Among other brutalities, the Khmer Rouge annihilated all of the educated class in Cambodia. Today, at least 30% of the country remains illiterate.

Tramung Chrum, like many rural villages in Cambodia, exists on subsistence farming and menial labor. There is no electricity in Tramung Chrum. There is no running water. The men, women, and children live in huts made of palm leaves and sticks and own little more than the clothes on their backs. They live a stripped down existence. Yet they crave education. Education ranks alongside food and water as a necessity of life.

The school at Tramung Chrum, with its three classrooms and library, took four months to build with a twenty-man crew from Phnom Penh. A camera recorded the excitement and awe of the villagers as they watched this wonder of concrete and steel girders and tiles rising bit by bit from the dirt.

On inauguration day, I was greeted by a gathering of the entire village and a large assortment of officials, including the vice governor of the province, the district chief of police (with his uniformed entourage), and a representative from the national ministry of education. Colored pennants had been hung from tall sticks and a ceremonial platform built out of bamboo and twine. All of the children of the village, about one hundred and fifty boys and girls, stood on both sides of the dusty path leading to the platform, waving American and Cambodian flags. In the distance gleamed the new school, its pale yellow walls and red roof shimmering in the fierce heat.

On the ceremonial platform, I found myself seated beside several Muslim Cham clerics, wearing their white robes, and several Buddhist monks in their saffron robes. The monks chanted and tossed a gentle rain of white flower petals onto the heads of the dignitaries.

Then, the speeches began. As I sweated heavily in my chair, I recalled that my nation's Independence Day was only one week away. I thought of all that has happened in recent years to tarnish the meaning and honor of that day around the world. Then I looked out at the new school, fifty yards away. I looked at the new flag pole, made of bamboo. I looked at the meandering cows, the principal livelihood of Tramung Chrum. I looked at the dirt road leading to Phnom Penh, the scattered groups of fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, the one hundred and fifty children squatting in front of the platform, miraculously holding still in the heat, listening to the long speeches. And I looked again at the American and Cambodian flags. I felt proud to be an American.