

Dear Colleagues,

Now that our Cambodian adventure is over, we all have had time to reflect on the experience. I always enjoy reading the notes I had jotted down in my daily journal. What follows is a compilation journal from the four of us who had a leadership role – Gary Bailey, Elvira Craig de Silva, Katherine Walsh and me.

There are numerous impressions about Cambodia that will remain with me. It is a country of contrasts. There is incredible poverty as evidenced most poignantly by the children who lived around the dump and the elderly at the Cambodian Elderly Support Organization. There is also evidence of great wealth as seen in the Royal Palace which made the phrase "The Kingdom of Cambodia" come alive. I was struck by its beauty and its opulence. Wealth was also represented by the building of expensive condominiums and single family homes. Yet, we learned that tens of thousands of children are homeless.

There was an energy about Phnom Penh that was exciting and frenetic. Numerous street vendors were selling thousands of wares. Most startling to me were the stands set up alongside the roads that were selling bottles of gasoline for the incredible number of motorbikes. I kept thinking about the potential danger of having gasoline in breakable bottles so near to traffic and the danger of seeing three, four and even five people on one motorbike with no one wearing a helmet. As someone who never gets in a car without fastening my seatbelt, the tuk tuks were a safety challenge that took some getting used to, and I found it easier if I didn't watch the traffic that we were navigating.

Again, in contrast, there were cars which we were told are increasing in number every year. The most frequent models appeared to be the Land Rover and the Lexus. They may have seemed more obvious because many of them had the model name lettered on their side doors in large block letters.

The motorbikes, tuk tuks, cars, and tour buses competed for road space and for the right of way. It was constantly a puzzle how drivers knew when to stop and when to go. Frequently, commuters traveled within touching distance of one another. While in a tuk tuk, I did witness a collision of two motorbikes. They simply got too close to one another. The two men picked themselves up and picked up parts of their bikes and drove off. There was no arguing, no yelling at one another or placing blame, nor any exchange of insurance information. It seemed like a usual and expected daily occurrence.

Perhaps the greatest contrast of the country was the history of the Pol Pot regime and its atrocities with the resilience, friendliness and helpfulness of the Cambodian people. I have seldom met a more engaging group of people. Whether our tour guides, restaurant or hotel staff, tuk tuk drivers, or agency personnel, we were greeted warmly and with great accommodation. It made our visit much easier than I had anticipated.

One other contrast was the lack of a social services infrastructure (destroyed by Pol Pot) with the work of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) who were working side by side with the Cambodian people to rebuild their country. As H. E. Say Siphonn, Secretary of State, Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, said at the closing of our conference session, "Cambodia has a very grand past, with our Angkor era. We have hopes to once again become a proud nation, and an active and contributing member of the global community."

Thank you all for making this remarkable journey with us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Betsy". The script is cursive and fluid, with the letters connected and a long, sweeping tail on the final 'y'.

Elizabeth J. Clark, PhD, ACSW, MPH
Executive Director, NASW
Delegation Leader, People to People Ambassador Program



*Delegation Leader's Combined Journals of
Professional Activities*

*United States – Cambodia Joint Conference on
Social Work
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
November 11 – 17, 2007*

Thursday and Friday, November 8 and 9 – Travel Days

Elizabeth Clark (EC):

All of us leaders were flying together from Los Angeles. We came in from different areas of the country and yet we found ourselves at the check-in line at the Los Angeles airport at the same time. It's always a relief when everyone has arrived. While we weren't sitting together on the airplane, it was a nice feeling to be traveling to a new country with friends.

Saturday, November 10 – Leader Arrival Day

EC:

When we arrived at the Hong Kong airport, it was about 5 AM. There weren't many people making connections then, and, at one point, it seemed like the four of us were the only travelers. It was an eerie feeling. We were happy when a restaurant opened and we could get some coffee.

In contrast to the flight from Los Angeles to Hong Kong, the flight to Phnom Penh on Dragonair was comfortable and easy. I was surprised by the heat and humidity when we landed. I was also happy to meet Eang Phalla, the People to People head guide who quickly got us through the visa process, and to find that all of our luggage had arrived.

The hotel was another pleasant experience. The Phnom Penh Intercontinental is a five star hotel with all the usual amenities including air conditioning and 220 volts of electricity. We were grateful for a few hours for rest before we met the tour guides (Phalla and Mr. Heng Vannak), our People to People representative Rebecca Gahl, and Ellen Minotti of Social Services of Cambodia for dinner and a program briefing. Rebecca was our People to People in-country representative on our trip last year in China, and it was nice to be working with her again.

Ellen had been our social work contact in Cambodia. A long time member of NASW, when she heard we were bringing a social work delegation to Cambodia, she contacted us and volunteered to help us plan the conference and set up site visits with NGOs. It was a great pleasure to meet her in person.

Katherine Walsh (KW):

We ate dinner at the Friends Restaurant. This is a unique restaurant run by the Friends NGO which services 1600 street children per day in Phnom Penh. The restaurant is one of their many training programs and provides young Cambodians with training in restaurant service work. The training component of our meal was delightfully evident in the instruction and modeling our wait staff were given by their trainers as they greeted us, took our orders, delivered our food, and, of course, bade us farewell with the customary salute of two palms pressed together directly in front of one's own face, thumbs pressed against the chin. Everywhere we were to go for the rest of the week – visiting children in group homes or elders in their own homes as well as public sites like the Royal

University, this universal sign of respect was exchanged by us and our Cambodian hosts of all ages.

At dinner, we discussed the overall program, last minute details, and how we would match delegates with their preferred site visits. We were happy for an early night.

Sunday, November 11 – Delegate Arrival

EC:

The delegation leaders met with our guides at 10 AM for hotel familiarization. We toured the conference area and meeting rooms and went over details.

We were then given a city tour. Phalla gave commentary. She especially pointed out places where the delegates would be making site visits and restaurants where we would be eating. We also drove past embassies, the Palace, the museum, and national monuments.

KW:

All along this wide expanse of boulevard, families and individuals (many of whom were seated in wheelchairs and appeared to have sustained amputations – perhaps from landmines) gathered. Some were entrepreneurs like those with birds in cages. For \$1 you could release two birds, which symbolized freeing yourself from whatever burdens you carried. Gary left two go free. Some vendors sold lotus flower buds. Fortune-tellers were scattered along the waterfront. On every boulevard there were open air shops and stands selling everything imaginable – from motor scooter parts to ornately carved wood furniture. Whole families gathered in front of their shops or stands, some eating their noon-time meal, others cleaning or organizing their merchandise or waiting on customers who often pulled up to the curb on their scooters. The traffic is harrowing with a multitude of scooters (often carrying two or three people) weaving in and out among the cars, trucks and busses. Tuk tuks (or bicycle type rickshaws) seem to be the most common form of transportation for tourists, and truck taxis – open-air trucks that seat 10 or 12 passengers – are the public mode of transportation for locals.

EC:

We had lunch near the river and then walked along the water. We had read that there were a large number of people in Cambodia who had amputations due to landmine accidents. At the river there were many adults and children on crutches and in wheelchairs.

I asked if there were fortune-tellers and we were directed to an older woman sitting on a wall. She was surrounded by her family including a small infant. While visiting Hong Kong a few years ago. I had my fortune told at a temple. My hosts were adamant that everyone should have their fortune told when they visited the temple. I had never had that done before and thought it was fun. So I decided to do it again.

This fortune-teller used cards. She asked me to shuffle them nine times and then pick some with my right hand and some with my left. Phalla interpreted for us so some parts seemed disjointed. All in all, it was a good fortune, and it was fun interacting with local people.

After lunch, we returned to the hotel to await the arrival of the delegates. They got there around 4:30 PM. They looked fairly exhausted. Several of them were without luggage, a difficult way to start a week abroad. Check-in went smoothly. The hotel was prepared and efficient – something that would become even more evident as the week went on.

While travel weary, most having spent at least 24 hours in transit, as a whole the group were amazingly cohesive and engaged with each other even prior to our orientation. Six of the delegates had been with us in China last year. It was nice to see them again.

KW:

We had an early, but lavish, dinner of mixed Asian origins (fried rice, Thai noodles included) and an array of local fruits such as dragon fruit, papaya, and small bananas, similar to those found in the Caribbean. There was no formal professional program at dinner. Each of the leaders was introduced and Phalla and Rebecca gave a brief overview of the activities for the following day.

After the introductions we were entertained by a young person's dance troupe called Korsang Kormix. It was composed of young Cambodian men who had been deported from the United States because they had gotten into some type of trouble. Many of them spoke no Khmer and the adjustment from life in the United States to life in Cambodia had been difficult. Their performing (a combination of rap and acrobatics) was a unifying theme for them. They were accompanied by a man doing a documentary film. He had been with them for almost two years.

The dancers joined the delegates for the buffet dinner. They seemed like any teenage boys in dress and in appetite. It was a nice cultural introduction for us all.

Many of our delegates would conduct site visits to Korsang during the week, accompanying workers onto the streets as part of the Korsang needle exchange and outreach program. The evening ended early, with most of us experiencing jet lag, but with the promise of a fascinating program awaiting us in the morning.

Monday, November 12 – Opening Ceremonies



KW:

The morning conference opened with the Minister of Women's Affairs – Her Excellency Dr. Ing Phavi – who graciously excused her Cambodian interpreter and addressed us in English. She was a petite woman who clearly has a massive agenda for her ministry, one of only a very few established by the government to address psychosocial issues in the rebuilding of Cambodia. Traditionally a hierarchical society in which women have not been allowed to own property, and since the Khmer Rouge and the ravages of Pol Pot, more than 40 percent of women and children live in abject poverty. The Minister has worked to change legislation and practices to empower women and improve the lives of their families. She informed us that the poverty rate has been reduced from more than 40 percent to 34 percent, although the vast majority of children still live in dire poverty, many having been orphaned by AIDS. And she noted that while the estimated percentage of Cambodians diagnosed with AIDS has been reduced from 12 percent to 9 percent, the fastest growing population of new cases are children whose virus is transmitted from their mothers. She noted that few government resources are allocated to health and social services because the emphasis is almost exclusively on economic recovery as the country rebuilds after 30 years of internal war and genocide. An estimated 1.7 million people in a country of 14 million were killed during the reign of Pol Pot.

Elvira Craig de Silva (ECdS):

Dr. Betsy Clark presented a very well organized and motivational speech highlighting the development and history of social work in the United States, which set the tone for the exchange and future collaboration between the two countries.

Dr. Neith Barom, Vice-Rector of the Royal University of Phnom Penh followed with a welcoming talk and focused on the collaboration and expectations of this first joint conference.

Gary Bailey, past president of the National Association of Social Workers – USA, talked about the great importance of social work from a global perspective and gave a detailed outline of the function and purpose of the International Federation of Social Workers.

Ellen Minotti, Director of Social Services of Cambodia, gave an overview of the non-governmental organizations working in Cambodia.

All the presentations were extremely informative and gave the delegates a solid foundation to better understand the purpose of our trip, put people in a learning mode, and set the stage for exchange with our Cambodian colleagues.

In the afternoon we had several panels ranging from Children and Youth to Cambodian Healthcare, Addiction/Substance Abuse and Paraprofessional Training/Development.

I attended and participated in the paraprofessional training panel where Ellen Minotti and some of her colleagues talked about the extensive program that has been put into place to train paraprofessionals similar to entry level social workers, with emphases on communication skills, cultural sensitivity, gender issues and ethical components. The paraprofessionals receive close supervision and ongoing feedback. I was impressed by the clear understanding of the workers in terms of issues that impede helping people to change. They are receiving very good training in terms of being objective and also in developing knowledge of human nature.

I also participated in the panel on alcohol and substance abuse and learned about the many programs that recruit youngsters who are homeless or using drugs to try to connect them with resources, support groups, clean needle exchanges and shelter.

Tuesday, November 13 – Site Visits

EC:

My first field visit was to Friends-International, The Street Children Network. Friends-International first started working with street children in Phnom Penh in 1994 where 61 percent of the population is under age 18, and 10,000 – 20,000 children are street children. They work with over 42,000 children each month.

Called Mith Samlanh in Cambodia, it's a place where homeless children are taught a vocational skill such as hairdressing, cosmetology, electronics, and small engine repair. The complex was huge. It encompassed several large buildings, many of them decorated with murals and others painted very bright colors. The entire place had a happy feel. Children of all ages seemed busy, curious, and engaged.

We were met by Birgit Assmann, a young social worker from Paris. Her husband was an attorney and he was there for the tribunal. She said they would be in Cambodia for two years. She had accidentally learned about Friends-International. She came for an interview and decided it was the right fit for her.

Like so many of the NGOs we visited, the staff at Friends-International seemed to make do with very little in the way of supplies. But they had a great deal of commitment and enthusiasm. We spent several hours visiting the different training programs. The repair shop seemed woefully lacking in tools. One person mentioned that they only had one wrench, but that they took turns using it.

In addition to practical and life skills training, students had educational opportunities such as learning to use a computer and doing arts and crafts. Many of the crafts were sold to tourists at a store across the street. They also had time for recreation and play.

Our guide told us that the whole complex had been rented to the program, but that the landlord had decided to sell it. They had raised enough money from numerous foundations for the down payment, but they needed additional financial assistance to help pay the mortgage. They sold bricks painted with artwork and were building a wall in the common area with them. We purchased one for NASW.



At the conclusion of our tour of the main complex, we went across the street where there was a program called ChildSafe, a program to protect vulnerable urban children, particularly to keep them out of the sex trade. We were especially impressed by their training program for tuk tuk drivers. The drivers who enrolled in their program went by the bus station at critical times and tried to bring children who had just come from other towns and rural areas to Phnom Penh to the center so they could be safe. The drivers in the program also had to agree not to pick up men accompanied by children nor transport them to or from hotels. The tuk tuks in the program were identified with a special symbol. A picture of such a tuk tuk driver is below.



Courtesy of Marie Jamieson

This site visit was a testimony to the work of NGOs in Cambodia. When coupled with the resiliency of the Cambodian people, strides are being made to overcome what seem like insurmountable odds.

KW:

At 8 AM we divided into small groups and boarded vans to take us throughout the greater Phnom Penh area to visit NGOs providing a wide array of services and programs to vulnerable populations. My first visit, with six colleagues, was to Un Sourir pour L'Enfant (For the Smile of a Child), which provides showers, meals, schooling and family food to 1300 children who live and work at the Phnom Penh Dump. We watched a video of children scavenging in the filthy dump 24 hours, 7 days a week to find scraps of cardboard, discarded hypodermic needles and any other saleable items in the enormous mounds of decomposing garbage that stretch out over several miles. A French couple established this NGO after witnessing the hopeless lives of these children, and they have created a phenomenal school with attached services to change the lives of children through education. They now house 250 graduates of their primary-secondary school in dormitories who attend Royal University and help to promote the cause of the program through serving as guides to visiting groups like ours.

After a fine lunch of Cambodian food at the Foreign Correspondents Club restaurant near the riverfront, we again set off in the mid-afternoon heat to our second round of site visits. I went with four delegates to the Little Sprouts program for HIV infected children sponsored by Mary Knoll. Father Kevin, a US Citizen and Mary Knoll brother, oriented us in the main office. A three story building housed their medical clinic, offices and training facilities. Many clients were gathered outside in small groups, bicycles resting against the fence that enclosed the offices, some waiting for the doctor to arrive for the clinic. While we were oriented by Father Kevin and a Cambodian trained supervisor, the house mothers from their nine residences were gathered in the next room for their weekly meeting. We learned about the many different programs Mary Knoll sponsors including the Seedlings of Hope, a hospice program for children with AIDS, the Little Sprouts residences for children with HIV called, the Bridges of Hope.

ECdS:

I went to visit the Cambodian Elderly Support Organization with another five delegates. I do not think that we were prepared for the many different situations we encountered.

We were in the outskirts of town, in a squatter village of extreme poverty. The streets were muddy and water ran under the homes that were constructed with planks of wood and on stilts.

The director of the small center for the elderly is a teacher who has been using part of his own home to accommodate a group of elderly women and a group of children who come to the center to learn to read and write and to do some weaving, sewing, and other activities. The center provides support, learning opportunities and, particularly, company and some protection for the elderly. The center subsists on donations and small grants. At present they are not sure how they can continue their work since the funding is being discontinued. We were told that, at this point, the elderly are not currently a priority

since there are so many other needy populations in the country, specifically children with no families.

The director of the center told us that the school situation is also very difficult. There are very few teachers, the salaries are low, and there are not enough schools for the children. He mentioned that they are focusing on domestic violence because the most vulnerable people, the elderly, women, and children, are victimized.

The residents were very welcoming and invited us to see their homes. They appeared happy to have visitors.

We talked about what could be done. Some delegates talked about forming some type of coalition when we get home to try and support the cause of the elderly in Cambodia.

There was also a lot of talk about poverty in the United States and what type of lessons we could share about the resiliency and the fortitude that we had witnessed.

In the afternoon, some of us visited the Jesuits Services. They are very well organized and run a multiphase cooperative that provides learning opportunities for the disabled, mini grants for the villagers, sewing workshops, repair services for wheelchairs, wood carving, embroidery and a variety of agricultural workshops that enhance the crops in the area. They also have health and parenting skills classes. It was an uplifting experience to see how people are responding to the care and supportive opportunities that are being provided so they can move forward.

Wednesday, November 14 – Site Visits Day 2

EC:

Both Kathy Walsh and I had a wonderful opportunity today. We were invited to visit Social Services of Cambodia, the paraprofessional social work training program that Ellen Minotti has run for 17 years. The program is housed in space at the Department of Health. One of our guides drove us there, and we had some difficulty finding it.

The space was beautifully decorated and had an open, serene feel. I was pleasantly surprised to find the 100th anniversary of social work poster that was designed by NASW hanging on one of the walls. The picture of Ellen and Kathy with the NASW poster is below.



Classes were in session, and Ellen had arranged for each of us to attend a class. Kathy went to a group work class, and I went to one on patient centered care. There were about 25 students in the class. They had all left their shoes at the door (I did likewise) and they sat on mats around the perimeter of the room. They had reserved a mat for me, and a young woman who spoke English sat next to me to translate. There appeared to be an almost equal number of men and women in the class. Everyone was engaged and the discussion was lively. They all appeared well prepared for the lesson and they volunteered readily. It could have been any social work class in the United States. Ellen said their program had trained almost a thousand students since its inception. While it does not have formal university degree designation, it covers all of the basic social work concepts and content that a BSW program would cover in our country. When asked how we could help sustain the program, Ellen said they needed additional current textbooks and training materials. She also said she would welcome social work faculty who could volunteer their time for (two weeks or two months or longer).

After we returned home, we were pleased to be able to ship a complete set of all textbooks published by NASW to Social Services of Cambodia so that the students could have access to our most recent research, practice methodologies, and ethics materials.

Ellen Minotti and her work at Social Services of Cambodia is another example of the difference that one dedicated social worker can make to bring about immense positive change.

ECdS:

Today we visited the Royal University of Phnom Penh. We were very well received and the person in charge of the tour at the university provided us with a historical background of how the university had developed and the chronology of the war as well as the situation of Cambodia and the role of the United States.

Everybody seems to be in a rebuilding effort. They have a beautiful library that they are going to expand. They mentioned to us that they are in need of learning resources, books, and technology. They appeared to be very interested in connecting with schools in the United States and to share education materials.

We met with the director of the school of social work and he described the undergraduate program that he has developed. The environment was bustling; the students were at the cafeteria socializing, at the library doing their work, at the computer labs. It resembles colleges and universities across the world. The enthusiasm and camaraderie of the students is typical of a college campus. The student population appeared to be very young.

The University has a very productive relationship with the University of Washington and some students have gone there to finish their degrees. They would welcome exchanges with other colleges in the United States and/or visiting scholars.

Gary Bailey (GB):

At the Royal University of Phnom Penh we met with Sister Louise Ahrens who is a Mary Noll sister and who teaches in the Education Department at the University. The University is older but not as old as some of the buildings I visited in China (Beijing). We met with the Acting Director of the Sociology Department, who is also a lecturer in Social Work, Narouen Thy. He had just returned from Seoul, Korea attending the second Apple Conference sponsored by the Korean Association and my friend Dr. Soung Yee Kim. The work that they are attempting to do in the creation of a government (state) sponsored program is quite ambitious. There are many opportunities to do further exchanges and to share some resources. The Cambodians are quite eager to develop the resources and to identify the next generation of people who will help to move the country forward.

Thursday, November 15 – Cultural Program**KW:**

We visited the prison S-21, a high school that had been used as a prison and torture camp during the years 1975-1979, when the entire population of Phnom Penh had been either relocated to the agrarian countryside or exterminated. We saw hundreds of photographs of innocent family members who had been rounded up and who would be photographed and killed, often through heinous forms of torture. The experience was beyond words and most of us sat in silence, some of us shedding tears, in the bus on the way back to the hotel having given witness to one of the many incomprehensible genocides in history.

What made it particularly indelible for me was the contemporary style of the high school—a building constructed in the era in which many of us attended high school, thus making the proximity of the Khmer Rouge all the more powerful.

In the afternoon we boarded the bus and traveled out to Cheung Ek, the Killing Fields. Our guide, Phalla, told her story on the ride to the site. With tears she told us about being forced with her 21 year old pregnant sister-in-law out of the city with thousands of others, like them, who had been separated from family. They ended their long journey in a work camp, where they did manual labor, trying to appear as docile and compliant as possible so as not to stand out and incur the wrath or whim of the young soldiers guarding them. Her three year old son became very ill due to lack of food and clean water and unsanitary conditions. Despite all of her efforts to find him food and tend to his needs, he died. This loss was clearly still devastating for her, as she told the story with great emotion and asked many questions as she concluded, including, “Why?” “Why would the Cambodian people do this to each other?” Many of us offered our gratitude to her for telling us this very personal account of an unfathomable era in contemporary history that was all the more powerful because of the personal connection we had made with her over the previous three days.

Our bus then pulled into a dirt parking lot with an unimpressive wall surrounding a large field bordered by simple residences in which life seemed to be proceeding normally – laundry was hung on clothes lines, children and animals were scattered in the streets and yards. Many of us had seen the American made movie so were familiar with the history of the site, but nothing could prepare one for the feelings the eerie site provoked. In the center of the vast fields, where we were told 120 mass graves have been identified, stood a monument-like structure with skulls stacked up behind glass enclosures, jutting up from the earth about 25 feet. The skulls were arranged by ages, with each shelf holding a different age group, including young children. There was a discernable noxious odor permeating the inside of the structure, which we could enter and view from all four sides.

After viewing this in silence, we roamed through the fields on dirt paths. When we looked down at the paths, we could see pieces of clothing and human bones protruding slightly out of the dirt. Pits about eight feet deep and ten feet wide with exposed earth were evidence of the 80 graves that have been excavated. Forty have been left unexcavated for posterity. Out of the loudspeaker we heard music playing – to simulate the music that had been played, at much higher decibels, continuously to mask the cries of the victims. We heard details from our guides about the methods of torture and murder that had been used. We again boarded the bus in the steamy afternoon sun and most of us processed our thoughts and feelings as we navigated back into the city, expressing our disbelief as well as our gratitude for making this sojourn together, witnessing together and recalling the resilience and dedication to change that we had witnessed and heard so much about from the site visits the previous two days.

Friday, November 16, 2007 – Cultural Program Day 2

KW:

This cultural day provided a rich opportunity to see the current Cambodia in a long term historical context. Our visit to the National Museum, a place of beauty and art, was restorative, as was the lunch by the Mekong River and the afternoon's activities visiting art galleries and the bustling Russian Market. It hardly seemed possible that our program was concluding when we gathered for our final dinner together, toasting each other, the experience, and NASW as well as People to People for what many remarked had been a life-changing experience. My toast included two components: A Native American saying, "The soul has no rainbow if the eyes have no tears" – which to me speaks to the meaningful changes that the resilient people of Cambodia are working toward, following their 30 years of war and tragedy. The second, from my home-town poet Laureate, Robert Frost, which expresses my sentiments about the individual social workers who came on this special journey together: "Two roads diverged in a wood – and I, I chose the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

Saturday, November 17, 2007 – Conclusion

GB:

This has been a phenomenal experience and has changed my view of this amazing country and its gracious people. I am more committed than before to helping social work be rebirthed as an important part of this country and also in working with Cambodian communities in the United States.