



Pictures of hope
Carl Kozlowski
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The tragic effects of genocide can be felt for generations, and Cambodia is one country that has been particularly affected by the ghastly mass slaughter of its own citizens. More than 30 years after the Khmer Rouge — also known as the Red Cambodians, but officially the Communist Party of Kampuchea — wiped out nearly a third of the population by killing more than 2 million citizens as part of a horrific social-engineering campaign, the country is still struggling to recover.

Despite the Khmer Rouge's determination to force Cambodia into being an agrarian society, countless children have grown up lacking farming skills because there are few adults who can teach them. That fact, combined with others in a never-ending cycle of bad decisions and bad luck, has literally ruined the lives of millions in that beleaguered nation.

But Heather Connell is determined to change all that through her work with the San Marino-based charity Safe Haven. An award-winning documentary filmmaker and photographer, Connell cofounded the program last year with photographer Theresa Kennedy and actress Megan Follows. Together the trio has supervised the health care and educational opportunities of 50 impoverished Cambodian children.

On Saturday, they will be attending the opening night of a new photo exhibit called "Cambodia: An Unbreakable Spirit" at Pasadena's Lineage Performing Arts Center. Featuring 20 photographs that offer a striking look at life in Cambodia, as well as a talk by Connell and a specially-commissioned and themed performance by the Lineage Dance troupe, the event seeks to raise both awareness and much-needed funds to continue their vital work.

"In 2006, I started production on a film called 'Small Voices: The Stories of Cambodia's Children,' and over the next 4 ½ years as I made the doc, I became deeply involved in the issues Cambodia and particularly the children there were facing," recalls Connell. "On a subsequent trip, I became involved with a 4-year-old boy with cerebral palsy named Sun Nam and was trying to find a place for him where he would have access to health care, physical and speech therapy, and realized that services like that didn't exist in Cambodia for kids suffering from disability and medical issues."

Since launching Safe Haven and its sister charity Community First Initiatives last November, 50 kids from 32 villages across Cambodia have received vastly improved care. In late October, the groups arranged "life-changing" orthopedic surgery for a 7-year-old girl with bilateral club feet and a 6-year-old boy, whose knee was backwards.

And, as their quality of life improves, Connell believes that profound societal change is possible as a result.

“Children who are born with disabilities there are labeled ‘unlucky’ and kept separate from other kids in their villages,” says Connell. “We’re going to offer them full-time physical therapy and nursing right in their homes, making their parents full participants in the therapy and recovery process.

“Education is a real key here, because it’s not just enough to simply say we’re going to take the child to the doctor and then drop them back into the village,” Connell continues. “We want parents as active participants, because it helps to lessen the stigma of the child with the disability in the village, so the next time a child is born with a disability in the village, there will be more understanding and acceptance of them.”

Safe Haven operates via outreach teams consisting of a nurse, a physical therapist, a speech therapist and a project manager, who then partner with local Cambodian hospitals like the Angkor Hospital for Children and a children’s surgical center. The care there matches Western standards, due to the fact that the hospitals are run by Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), with all surgeries performed pro bono and all pre- and post-surgical care provided by CFI and Safe Haven.

“We believe if you go in a village and address all the issues together that keep a village from being self-sustaining, that’s how you change things,” says Connell. “Not if you look at one problem and ignore the rest. So we have agriculture and clean water initiatives, a health education initiative and jobs training initiative.

“If a child doesn’t have access to health care or education, they can’t be healthy enough to work in the field,” Connell continues. “If they don’t have agricultural skills because their parents were killed in the genocide, they have to learn. Or they can learn, but they still need access to clean water. All of these things work together in conjunction, so at CFI, our different initiatives work together to create a sustainable village that we can then leave and they’ll survive on their own.”

All this work might seem unlikely for a woman who grew up on a farm in the central Massachusetts town of Westminister and majored in English literature and theater arts in college. But after moving to California 11 years ago with the intention of focusing solely on writing, she started making documentary shorts to raise social awareness and activism for various causes. Her next film, “Forget Us Not,” focuses on the 5 million non-Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust.

But Connell’s current focus remains on the photography exhibit, which will run through the month of November at Lineage with 100 percent of sales proceeds going to Safe Haven’s work. She’s excited to see the response CFI and Safe Haven are already getting from people here, half a world away, and has high hopes for the future.

“When it comes to children that are living with difficulties like medical issues or dire poverty, that resonates with people, and what we hope to do is make people aware that, even if it’s not happening in their backyard, these are kids who still deserve their attention and support,” says Connell.

“People often ask why I’m doing work in Cambodia as opposed to here in the US when there are some kids with the same issues, but the poverty there is so extreme, there are no resources there for the children and here there’s some resources,” she said. “Right now, we’re a struggling small project that’s primarily self-funded while we’re trying to get the word out there. We don’t want to stop just because there are no funds.”