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## Cambodia

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A former U.S. Marine who was wounded in the Vietnam War, Wayne receives some benefits as a disabled veteran slowly losing sight in his left eye, which was hit by mortar fragments. Since the war, the nondenominational Christian has devoted his life to providing health care to the poor in such places as Cambodia, the United States and Central America. He works at the center with Theresa L. Hudler, a registered nurse who served with the U.S. Army in Vietnam and is an evangelical Christian.

As we talked about the stars, I realized that the solar panels we were installing at the health center are designed to harness the power of the star closest to us, the sun, and pointed out to Vandin that the sun also is a star.

The conversation continued until we all went to bed in various buildings around the center. My sleep was quite restless, plagued by strange nightmares of people's faces turning to skulls. It didn't help that a large lizard was running around my room all night.

The next morning when I told him about my dreams, Wayne explained that I wasn't the first visitor to have problems sleeping. He said my bed probably lay over a mass grave, since this place was used as a killing field by the Khmer Rouge, the genocidal revolutionary movement that ruled Cambodia from 1975-79. Then I told him what had happened during a work break the day before. Vandin suddenly had started talking about what it was like to grow up as a slave child in a Khmer Rouge farm camp, and recalled seeing a Khmer Rouge soldier kill a baby with a bayonet. He pulled a stringy weed from the ground and tied it around my wrists to show me how the Khmer Rouge prepared prisoners for death.

"Do you know how they killed you?" he asked as I stood before him, hands tied. Then he then held up his arms as if gripping an invisible club and swung at my head.

## Return to Cambodia

I had first met Wayne in 1999 when I traveled to Cambodia from Thailand on a journalism tour hosted by officials of the Thai Catholic Church and the Swiss-based *Union Catholique Internationale de la Presse* (International Catholic Union of the Press or UCIP). That trip was financed through a scholarship from the Catholic Journalism Fund, an affiliate of the Catholic Press Association. I wrote about my journey in *Catholic Courier* articles published Nov. 25 and Dec. 2, 1999.

I had always been fascinated by Southeast Asia because my uncle, Patrick Cullivan, like Wayne, had fought in the Vietnam War. I was a child when the United States invaded neutral Cambodia to attack the Vietnamese communists who had sanctuaries there. And I remember well seeing the 1984 film "The Killing Fields," which told the stories of the U.S. role in Cambodian history and of the communist



Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

The team installs solar panels that will power the water-purification unit.



Sek stands in front of the tank where unfiltered water is collected from the Wat Opot health care center's well. The water is purified by exposure to ultraviolet light as it passes through a tube. Water from this unit is being used by patients and workers at Wat Opot in southern Cambodia, as well as residents of the surrounding area.

Khmer Rouge, which defeated a U.S.-backed regime and proceeded to decimate the already long-suffering Cambodian people.

When I met him, Wayne was working for COERR to provide medical care to several Cambodian communities. He took our group of journalists on a stroll through a Phnom Penh slum. Pointing to a filthy creek running through the neighborhood, he asked: "Did any of you have ice cubes in your drinks today? That's where they came from."

Wayne and I talked about Cambodia's water problems, and he noted that many of the diseases he treated were caused — or exacerbated — by dirty water. When I returned to the states, I met Sarah Brownell, then a volunteer at Rochester's St. Joseph's House of Hospitality and cur-



Sarah Brownell (left) shows Wat Opot workers piping for the health center's water-purification unit.

rently a graduate student in engineering at the University of California at Berkeley.

I wrote a *Courier* feature article on Sarah's solar-powered lighting projects in rural Haiti, which were sponsored then by Corpus Christi Church and now by Haitian Outreach-*Pwoje Espwa*, or H.O.P.E., an independent group founded by the parish. (*Pwoje Espwa* are Creole words meaning Project Hope.) As in Cambodia, Haiti's impoverished rural communities often lack electricity, and solar power affords them the benefits of electricity without reliance on the government or private utilities.

Midway through my interview with Sarah, I asked if she would be interested in trying to build a solar-powered water-purification unit in Cambodia, as she was then planning to do in Haiti. She said yes, and as the months passed, we corresponded with Wayne and other COERR officials about doing such a project. COERR designated us official volunteers, and we spent about a year raising funds from private donors and a number of Catholic parishes to bring a solar-powered water purification unit to Cambodia.

Cambodians, especially in rural areas, can collect relatively pure rain water during the rainy months of summer and fall. But when the rain water runs out, they often have to procure impure water from such sources as stagnant, muddy ponds.

Although most Cambodians boil their water to purify it, chlorine and other common purification methods are generally not available.

The units Sarah had installed use an ultraviolet light to purify water flowing through a tube. Water processed through such a system comes out twice as pure as most U.S. water, Sarah told me. Wayne said a purification unit at the health care center would provide water for both patients and villagers, and would be used to sterilize instruments.

"This will result in a reduction of the need for fire wood to boil water by the villagers, or, in the case of the center's staff, buying bottled water, which means a big savings of money for both the families and our program," he said. "That savings can be used for other things like food for the families living with AIDS."

## Clean water

Working mostly with Vandin and Sek, a young handyman who lives at the center, it took us two days to install the unit. Sarah and I then returned with Wayne to Phnom Penh for another two days to write directions for installing more units. Vandin will translate these instructions into Khmer, Cambodia's language.

We returned to Wat Opot for two days to show villagers how to use the water-purification unit. At the health center, we met a 33-year-old HIV-positive woman named Mutmol who has three children, one of them an HIV-positive baby. Her husband died from AIDS five months ago and, although he served in the Cambodian army, she said she receives no widow's benefits. She filled a jug of newly purified water to take home with her.

Like many of Cambodia's AIDS widows, Mutmol has experienced the ostracization that often afflicts people with AIDS, and noted that it hampers her ability to make a living. We accompanied her on her way home, where she told us about her life and how some people will no longer associate with her.

"I want to sell some things at the market," she said in Khmer, as Vandin translated. "But I am afraid to bother the customers because I am (HIV-)positive."

Mutmol, who lives in a one-room bamboo house, said she dreams that her children will grow up to get good factory jobs in Phnom Penh. As she drank a cup of water from the newly installed system, I asked how she will use the rest of the jug she brought home from the center.

"For drinking and to make food," she replied.

She giggled as I complimented her on the attractiveness of her home, one wall of which displays pictures of Thai movie and television stars clipped from magazines. I had seen many such displays in the homes of Cambodia's poor — brilliant collections of dreamy color and light that always look wonderfully strange in such settings.

Then I remembered my conversation a few nights earlier, when Vandin asked me how close the stars were to the Earth. And I thought, as I looked at this young widow's smile, how close are the stars, indeed.

## Bills

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health benefits that violate church teaching, but the bill's passage represented an abandonment of that position, church leaders said. On the day the Senate bill passed, the state's bishops, including Bishop Matthew H. Clark, issued a statement condemning it.

"We, the Catholic Bishops of New York State, are united in the view that legislation passed today in the state Senate that would force Catholic employers to provide coverage for contraception in employee health insurance plans is a clear and unprecedented violation of religious liberty," the bishops wrote. "By providing a religious exemption for parishes while forcing Catholic education, health and human ser-

vice ministries to violate the teaching of our faith, the Senate is legislating what is and is not Catholic. This is a grave and unconstitutional encroachment by government into the realm of religion.

"We now request that the members of the state Legislature reconsider their position on this issue and reject any measure not providing adequate protection for religious conscience," the bishops continued. "Failing that, we will call on Governor (George) Pataki to veto this intolerant legislation. All people of good will, regardless of their views on the morality of contraception, should reject the attempts by our Legislature to trample on the First Amendment. The framers of the Constitution intended for all religious beliefs and practices to be accommodated, not simply those deemed acceptable by the particular cultural climate of the day."

The Catholic conference urged Catholics to contact their legislators to express opposition to the bills, and issued a "talking points" memorandum to inform voters about the bill. Among the key points in the memo were the following:

- "The contraception mandate was tacked onto a bill that contains many excellent provisions that would increase access to preventive screenings for breast cancer, cervical cancer and osteoporosis. The Catholic Church is one of the state's major providers of health care services to women and supports these aspects of the bill. We are appalled that contraception and abortion advocates have made women's health a pawn to advance their own ideological agenda."

- "This is not about the morality of artificial birth control methods or in vitro fertilization. This is about the constitution-

ally protected First Amendment right of religious freedom."

- "This bill represents the first step in a dangerous slippery slope. Any new precedent narrowing the scope of religious liberty opens the door for new laws that would force churches to abide by insurance mandates for direct abortion, cloning, and euthanasia and paves the way for mandates on hospitals and other agencies to directly provide these procedures."

Poust also expressed disappointment that no other religious group in the state had expressed opposition to the Assembly and Senate bills. "We have always contended that, even though this particular (Senate) bill will principally affect only Catholics, it has grave implications for all religions," Poust said "This is not simply a fight about contraception; this is a fight for religious liberty."