

North Meets South The Future Light Orphanage at Nishimachi

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Nishimachi is a community which thrives on diversity – or that is how we like to think of ourselves.

What bigger test of diversity than linking 25 middle school Cambodian orphans with a group of NIS middle school students?

On September 18 and 19 Nishimachi hosted a visit of children from the Future Light Orphanage of Phnom Penh. For the 25 kids from Phnom Penh this was a journey of “firsts” – the first trip outside of Cambodia, first plane ride, first train ride, first elevator ride, first taste of a MacDonald’s hamburger, etc.

For members of the Nishimachi community, it was a surprise to see the poise, charm and adaptability of this group of kids, many of whom began their lives in refugee camps.

The 25 Cambodian children and five adult supervisors were in Japan for a performance of classical Cambodian



Preparing instruments in the gym



dance at the Aichi Expo. Nishimachi was their first stop. They arrived at the gym straight from Narita Airport early on the morning of September 18, after an all night plane ride from Phnom Penh. After showers, a nap and lunch, they paired up with NIS students to explore Azabu Juuban, followed by a barbecue with NIS students, faculty and families.

This first encounter could not have gone better, thanks to the thoughtful planning of faculty, headmaster, students and families. Of course, credit must be given to the resilience and flexibility of our Cambodian guests and their adult supervisors.

The Future Light Orphanage, known to many as FLO, is a project which has been supported by several Nishimachi families over the years. As with many projects in Cambodia, it began with introductions from former NIS parent, Bernie Krisher, who has organized the building of schools and a hospital in Cambodia and has established a daily newspaper. John Vandenbrink, Chair of the NIS Board and his wife Donna have visited FLO several times, and they have hosted visits by FLO founder, Madame Nuon Phaly, to Japan. Their son, Eric Vandenbrink, a former NIS STUCO president, spent much time at FLO during his several stays doing volunteer work in Cambodia.

The Origin of FLO dates back to 1987, when Madame Nuon Phaly founded the Khmer People Depression

Relief Project (KPDR) in a refugee camp known as Site 2, on the Thai-Cambodia border.

Site 2 was the largest of the camps which sprang up in so-called "liberated zones" on the border. Of the 370,000 Cambodian refugees who escaped to the border in the 1980s, Site 2 was home to 200,000. Living in squalor with scarce food and water, people in the camps formed makeshift communities. Social order was hit-and-miss, and grudges were often settled with guns, knives or a purloined grenade.

Many of the residents of Site 2, particularly the females, suffered from depression, usually due to traumatic experiences such as rape, torture or the death of one or more child. In addition to the difficulties of coping with a traumatic past, refugees confronted the anxieties of an uncertain future, with no idea of when or if they could return to their homes and resume a normal life.

Mrs. Phaly and her staff at KPDR combined modern counseling methods with traditional Khmer practices to work with the refugee families. She became well known for her work, publishing papers in the United States and Europe, and eventually winning the Figaro Prize and Magsaysay Prize in recognition of her work and contribution to the field of public mental health.

In 1993, when constitutional government was restored to Cambodia, Madame Phaly finally returned to Phnom Penh, where she continued her practice of working with depressed people. By that time she was accompanied by 91 children, all of whom were either



Madame Phaly of Future Light Orphanage

orphaned or abandoned in the refugee camps. From that time to this, Madame Phaly cannot resist taking a homeless or hopeless child into her care.

This was the beginning of today's FLO which is now home to 230 children and serves nearly 370 families with counseling and rehabilitation services.



Many of the children who came to Nishimachi in September were born in Site 2 and were among the



original children who were repatriated with Madame Phaly to Phnom Penh.

Whatever misfortunes the FLO children may have experienced in their early lives, everyone who came in contact with them in Japan were astonished by their good manners, energy, humor and poise. Of course, the kids had problems. For example, September in Japan seemed cold to kids who grew up on the equator. And for some reason, several of the kids got motion sickness on Japan's smooth riding trains and preferred cars. Food was a bit of a problem, but as long as rice was served nobody went hungry. Despite the inevitable problems which accompany a first overseas trip, tears, tempers and tantrums were not to be seen.

The behavior of the children is a tribute to the parenting skills of Madame Phaly and her staff. Besides the training which the children receive in FLO, Madame Phaly systematically tries to expose the children to as many positive experiences as Cambodia has to offer. She also has built guest facilities so that overseas visitors and volunteers can stay at FLO and spend time with the children.

FLO also maintains an active education program. In addition to the normal public school curriculum, FLO students have daily supplemental lessons in English and computer skills. Some also study Japanese conversation. And those in the classical dance troupe have music and dance lessons daily, with all day lessons on week-ends.

This rigorous training in the traditional performing arts is Madame Phaly's way to develop in her children a cultural identity and sense of pride. After years of war and turmoil, this effort at FLO is one of several projects in Cambodia to re-establish links with a rich cultural heritage.

Those who were fortunate to see the dances realized, and were perhaps surprised, that this was more than an amateurish performance by a group of middle school children. Each movement was carefully choreographed and rehearsed. The children had internalized the dances to a degree that is usually only seen in professional performers of the highest level.

At Expo, the FLO performance was enjoyed by several thousand people. Many came more than an hour before curtain time in order to secure seats.

One of the highlights of Expo was teaming up with a group of Japanese middle school students from Mie Prefecture. Three teachers from Mie who had previously volunteered at FLO chartered a bus and brought thirty of their students to Expo to spend the day with the FLO children. After the dance performance, the FLO kids changed out of their costumes and with their newly found friends from Mie went their separate ways to enjoy the attractions of Expo. Toward the end of the day I asked one of the Japanese teachers how she thought this venture in cross cultural exchange was going. She said all of the kids were having fun, but communication was a problem. Thinking she meant it was a problem for the Cambodian kids, I remarked that the FLO children were away from Cambodia for the first time and some of them had problems with English. But no, she said the Cambodian children were doing fine, it was the Japanese kids who were having problems.

What can be more different than an international school like Nishimachi, a Japanese school in Mie Prefecture and an orphanage on the outskirts of Phnom Penh? And yet, each of these institutions shares some common goals, one of which is to prepare children for a globalized world. To my surprise, as I witnessed the FLO tour of Japan, I felt that Madame Phaly is doing as good a job at this task as any school, anywhere.

FLO children with Ambassador of Cambodia H.E. Mr. Pou Sothirak and his family after the performance at Nishimachi.

