



Sudbury contingent celebrates opening of Lincoln- Sudbury Memorial School in Cambodia

By Mira Vale/Special to the Town Crier
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SUDBURY — On Tuesday, May 11, I handed in my statistics final exam and headed back to Lincoln, a joyous return home after what was by all accounts a wonderful first year of college. The next afternoon, I set off to visit Lincoln-Sudbury. This little jaunt was not to drop by my former high school. Rather, the journey on which I embarked was to attend the opening ceremony for the **Lincoln-Sudbury Memorial School**, a sister school to our own L-S in the Thmar Kaul district of Battambang, Cambodia.

Over the past twenty months, students and community members involved with the Lincoln-Sudbury Memorial School Project have worked to raise funds to build and maintain a sister school in memory and honor of the students and graduates of L-S who died before their time. Working alongside American Assistance for Cambodia (AAfC), a prominent nonprofit that has constructed over 500 schools in rural Cambodia since 1999, we passed our initial fundraising goal of \$13,000 last June, about the same time as the L-S Memorial School finished construction. The school building, which boasts five classrooms furnished with desks, benches, chalkboards, school supplies, and English-speaking teachers, opened for its 300 high school-aged students on October 1, 2009. This trip, which sent what I hope will be the first of many contingents from Sudbury's L-S, was intended to celebrate our partner school's existence and to begin to establish relationships between our school communities.

So twenty-one long and altitudinous hours after leaving Lincoln's luscious and temperate verdure, I touched down in Phnom Penh, the nation's capital. I stepped off the plane into heat more penetrating than I can describe and met up with Peng Ty, the AAfC representative assigned to take us around. I also met up with L-S legend Bill Schechter, much-beloved history and journalism teacher of several decades, and David Barron, a professional photographer, Sudbury resident and L-S alum from 1978.

After a day in Phnom Penh spent catching our breath and touring the most important sites, museums, and genocide memorials, we drove up to Battambang on National Highway 5, Cambodia's main roadway. A single-lane, startlingly straight thoroughfare, the highway took us by countless villages and rice fields.

The next morning was the opening school ceremony. Something of a misnomer, given that school has been in session for seven months, the students were nonetheless thrilled to see us as we pulled up to the school complex. The ceremony was so colorful and joyous. Bill and I both delivered speeches, as did the school principal, the provincial minister of education and sport, and the district governor. We were blessed by Buddhist monks, listened to the Khmer national anthem sung in unison, and cut a ceremonial ribbon in front of the school's main entrance.

As the students filed into their classrooms, our L-S contingent went through each room, handing out school supplies and pointing out Massachusetts and Cambodia on the first world map these children had ever seen. All the kids wanted to take pictures with us, and though I think my smile broke from the photo ops, I appreciated the chance to meet students and ask them about their lives.

We returned the next morning to talk more, and I was supremely relieved to be able to walk into classrooms without receiving a standing ovation and enthusiastic applause. I spent most of my time with Nary, a cheerful twelfth-grader who plans to attend university in the fall. Clearly at the top of her class, Nary relished the chance to practice her English, which is her favorite school subject among Khmer, math, biology, chemistry, and physics. The Cambodians I met were not especially physically affectionate, but Nary gave me a big hug when we had to part ways.

I returned home several days later, mind swimming with ideas, hopes, and plans for our two Lincoln-Sudburys. Amidst effusive thank-yous in his speech, the school principal noted that the Memorial School could use another two computers; the solar panel that powers the one we currently have installed can support up to three, and having only one computer for three hundred students is a ratio that borders on absurdity. One of my hopes for this project is to continue raising money to support and improve our sister school.

In my own speech, I focused on the three goals I have for this project. The first goal, to positively direct the grief of my own community so as to heal from our losses, is one that is ongoing and can never be fully achieved. The countless letters and emails I have received to date give me hope that this project is helping that process of healing.

My second goal is to help another school community by enhancing opportunities for education. From talking with students and hearing how appreciative they are to learn in this building, I am confident that we have and can continue to assist our friends at the school in Thmar Kaul.

My third goal is to establish a lasting, sustainable connection between our two school communities, relationships that afford everyone an opportunity to learn from each other across thousands of miles. I hope students from Lincoln and Sudbury will email

with students from Thmar Kaul, and I hope L-S will send groups to visit and volunteer at our sister school in years to come.

Cambodia has been through times of unspeakable hell, tragedy beyond what we can comprehend. Some of this suffering came at the hands of the United States, which dropped more tons of bombs on Cambodia during the Vietnam War era than it did on Japan in the Second World War. Lincoln-Sudbury has also seen its share of sadness, though I will not pretend our suffering lies on a comparable scale. Our communities stand to learn so much from each other. It is my sincere hope that L-S in Cambodia will become a proud and sustained point of contact, and that L-S in Sudbury will develop involvement in Cambodia as a continuing part of its curriculum and its legacy.

Mira Vale, a student at Yale University, came up with the idea of starting a school in Cambodia and led many fundraising efforts while a student at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High.

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If anyone would like to make a donation to this worthy cause, please go to the L-S Memorial School web site. Paypal is available for your convenience.

<http://www.LincolnSudburyMemorialSchool.org>

And thank you so much!

Bill Schechter
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