

# From Killing Fields

## A small Philadelphia school grows hope in a poor Cambodian community

BY POL-PAUL PAT

On a rainy spring morning in the Logan section of North Philadelphia, several dozen people squeeze into the narrow converted house that is Philadelphia Cambodian Evangelical Church. Most of the houses in the neighborhood are brick row homes, many of them with metal-barred windows or doors; some are abandoned, their windows boarded up. The people inside the church are mostly Cambodian children and their families, all of them in attendance for the annual end-of-year ceremony of Logan Hope School (LHS), a small, private Christian K-8 school that serves mostly poor Cambodian and African American students from the local community.

Anita MacBain, 50, the school's co-founder and principal, is committed to breaking through cultural and educational barriers, committed to going the extra mile in order to give these children a hopeful future. She remembers one Christmas season when, having observed a promising student flounder for a couple of weeks, she approached his mother to see what she could do to help. The mother admitted that she didn't have money for tuition or for the upcoming holidays. MacBain didn't hesitate. She rounded up a donated gift card and bought them a chicken and some vegetables so they could have a Christmas feast.

"I knew that did something," says MacBain, "because when the student came back to school, he was willing to do his work. And I told him, 'See, you've got to trust that God has a plan and puts people around to help us out when we need it most.' It's really precious to see the power of the gospel revealed not just through me but through the teachers and even the students. I've seen students go beyond themselves to really help

other people. That's why I think the gospel is so real, because people don't do that unless they share that understanding."

The LHS graduation celebration is simple but sincere, reflected by the church's interior design. The sanctuary, located in what was once a living room, is decorated with burgundy carpets and matching chairs, pale pink drapes, and a white fireplace. In typical Cambodian fashion, the walls are white and bare except for a wooden clock on the back wall and the church's banner with its name in Khmer and English. It's a fitting place for LHS's ceremony—a place where Christianity, education, American culture, and the Cambodian community converge. There is nothing to distract from what is being celebrated here: the future of these children. Academic success is front and center here—a sharp contrast to the way education has been stigmatized in recent Cambodian history and devalued in the Cambodian American community at large.

### The legacy of war

Most Cambodians living in America today are either refugees or the children of refugees. Prior to 1975 few Cambodians resided in the United States, but in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, a civil war, and the worst military regime in the country's history — Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge—the once peaceful country of about 8 million saw up to a quarter of its population killed off through torture, starvation, disease, grueling labor, and outright slaughter. Survivors fled for other countries, and tens of thousands of them migrated to the United States between 1979 and 1984. Some came via individual and church sponsorships, but the majority resettled with the aid of relief orga-



Anita MacBain surrounded by students at Logan Hope School.

# to Learning Streets

nizations and the government's refugee program. Some ended up displaced in remote areas in the Midwest, but most settled in larger cities on each of the coasts: Long Beach, Calif.; Seattle and Tacoma, Wash.; Atlanta, Ga.; Washington DC; Lowell, Mass.; and Philadelphia.

Because of this horrific chapter in their history, many Cambodians remain skeptical about the value of education. During the Khmer Rouge takeover, citizens were forced out of their homes and into the countryside, where they marched along dirt roads to an unknown fate. The communist soldiers would request their "biographies," details which would determine whether an individual would be spared, taken to a torture camp or work camp, or immediately shot in an open field or by the side of the road. Anyone with an advanced education—doctors, lawyers, teachers—had little chance of being spared. Those who caught on to the soldiers' agenda lied about their occupations. Only a small minority of the country's artists, writers, teachers, doctors, scientists, and community leaders escaped the "killing fields" of Cambodia.

Once relocated in the States, despite the lure of the "American Dream," few of the refugees had respect for education. Most of them were rural poor and had little education to begin with—even by Cambodian standards—and thus saw little value in investing in an American one. Even today, there are still many older Cambodians who barely speak English and seldom leave their homes. For many adults, education remains a dubious advantage; observed from a skeptical distance, it is seen only as an ancillary component of survival, an attitude which has unfortunately trickled down to the younger generation. Although some Cambodians have begun to change their view of education over the last decade, the Cambodian community still ranks among the lowest in high school graduation rates, college attainment, and median income.

A survey conducted by the United Way of Greater Los

Angeles in the 1990s reported that Cambodians finished last on virtually every social indicator, with 46 percent living below the poverty line. Lavinia Limon, director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement during the Clinton administration, told the *New York Times* in 2003, "The Cambodians are manifestly the greatest failure of the refugee program in this country." Despite some projected progress for the 2010 census, the younger generation of Cambodian Americans—such as the students at Logan Hope School—still has a long road ahead.

## The road to hope

Inside the church, MacBain plays master of ceremonies. A jovial woman with billowy gray hair, she sports large, aviator-like glasses. She welcomes the small crowd and passes off the microphone to her teachers, who take turns introducing their students and handing out achievement awards. Darrel Sing, 27, affectionately known as "Mr. D," is one of five teachers at the school. The only male teacher, Sing instructs the kindergarten class. He has a cool, relaxed demeanor, an attribute shared by many of the teachers and staff.

"I think I made them cry a little more than my group last year," Sing says half-jokingly to the audience. Everyone laughs. As he shares some of the challenges and highlights of the year, his six students stand bashfully in front of the crowd. He steals a glance at them, smiles boyishly, and says of his students, "I'm proud."

There's much to be proud of at Logan Hope School. The school, officially registered with the state of Pennsylvania and classified as

Title 1, is associated with the nationwide Street School Network, a nondenominational network that includes secular schools as well. All schools in the network share the common goal of providing affordable education to students from at-risk communities. Like the other schools in the network, LHS runs mostly on donations, with only about 10 percent of the operational costs covered by tuition, currently at \$40





a month per student. The network's motto is that "street schools [are] the road to hope for at-risk kids," and their website, StreetSchoolNetwork.org, underscores that while 7,000 US students drop out of school daily, 73 percent of the network's students enroll in college.

Susan Boun, 14, a Cambodian student, is decked out for her graduation ceremony in a long red evening gown and silver heels. She holds a bouquet of red roses, looking more like a beauty pageant contestant than a middle school graduate. Concerned with the high rate of dropout and teenage pregnancy among Cambodian girls in the neighborhood, Boun's parents made a commitment to educating their daughter at LHS. Transferring in from the public school system as a second-grader, Boun needed lots of individual tutoring to catch up. "In the beginning I was below reading level," she says, "but Logan Hope helped me to improve and love reading." Today she's headed for one of the city's top high schools as one of the many success stories found at the school.

## Whole-life ministry

MacBain met her husband, Ken, in an evangelism class at a megachurch in a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia. Soon the couple found themselves participating in various service projects. Shortly after marrying in 1989, they moved out of the suburbs into a house in the Logan neighborhood. Dedicating much of their time to urban ministry—tutoring, leading Bible studies, and teaching English to immigrant adults—they began to see a clear need for better education, particularly for the children of the immigrant families they were working with. MacBain says she saw too many kids lost in overcrowded classrooms, lagging behind for lack of attention in the public school system. The seed for Logan Hope School was planted.

In 1999, with the help of a few donors, the couple purchased an abandoned building next door to their house and began converting it into a functioning school building. Over the years, with the help of volunteers, the house has under-

gone a huge overhaul, including a repurposed kitchen, renovated bathrooms, and updated windows, flooring, heating systems, and siding. When the student body began to exceed the building's space, the MacBains designated the living room in their own home as a classroom, thus knocking down both the physical and metaphorical walls between their home and ministry life.

This whole-life aspect of the ministry is evident throughout MacBain's day: She transports in the school van those children who cannot walk to LHS; she serves as principal and, if needed, substitute teacher during the school day and after-school program hours; she cooks and cares for her own three children (all students at LHS) after school; and if anyone from the school or local community needs her assistance, MacBain often extends herself to help. (Neither Ken nor Anita receives a salary from the school; he works as a part-time pension consultant.) And in Anita's "free" time, it's likely that she's mulling over what needs to be fixed next or how she's going to raise the funds to pay her teachers—a growing concern in this shrinking economy.

*When I grow up I want to be a photographer.*

*Being a photographer helps me express my emotions. A sunset amazes me by the shades of colors, the magnificence of the brightness it shows.*

RAKSMEY YIM

For MacBain, working with the Cambodian community in Logan is a providential calling. She describes herself as "very zealous" when it comes to sharing her faith: "I really believe Christ is the foundation of everything." Beneath her motherly demeanor and evangelistic passion is a tough and street-smart woman, the result of living in this impoverished neighborhood for two decades. Her friends assert that





MacBain is not afraid to stand up to anyone, especially anyone doing wrong to the community. In situations where most people might look (or run!) the other way, MacBain will unapologetically engage—even if it is with a drug dealer—and threaten to call the cops. And it’s no different when it comes to obstinate parents; MacBain holds her ground. A few years ago, she dismissed a student because his mother had been habitually disruptive; the woman also happened to be her neighbor and refused to speak to MacBain until recently. When recounting the incident, MacBain reaffirms the school’s slogan: L.O.G.A.N—Loving Our God and Neighbor. Of her firm philosophy towards difficult parents, she says, “You know, you have a choice—if you don’t like the way we’re going about teaching kids, you can take them somewhere else.”

### **Broadening the support base**

MacBain admits to being worried about the sustainability of the school past her own involvement, and the extent of her involvement is such that she hasn’t had the time to find and mold her successors. To combat this problem, she has instituted two major changes of late. First, the school connected with Mission Year, an organization founded by Bart and Tony Campolo that sends out teams of young adults to serve inner-city communities. A staff of three men and three women from various places around the country, all in their 20s, moved into Logan in the summer of 2008 to assist MacBain and the teachers. They didn’t have to wait long to begin experiencing the challenges of inner-city life—including a homicide just a few houses down.

“Nobody’s fazed about the stuff that goes on here,” says Tina Kroona, who moved from Southern California to join Mission Year. “I’ll never be able to see life the same.” Initially she had envisioned herself as a missionary overseas but now says, “Why would I leave the US when there’s so much need here—in my own backyard?” Despite the challenges they’ve

faced in Logan, three of the members found such joy in serving the community that they’ve decided to stay in Philadelphia beyond their service time.

The second major change is that MacBain has assigned one of her teachers, 27-year-old Kim Roth, to replace her as head of development. After three years of teaching at the school, Roth has moved on to fundraising and networking, gathering more resources and support. She came to LHS after meeting the MacBains at church and moved to Philadelphia after having spent much of her life in the suburbs.

“I like living here better than the suburbs,” says Roth. “People have issues everywhere, but here you can’t hide them. I feel like people here are a whole lot more honest and real about stuff because they can’t hide. You know who has drugs coming out of their house. If someone’s using or fighting—

**“When I grow up I want to be a doctor. Doctors are like magicians. They cure many people from sicknesses and diseases. I want to help many people live a happy life without worrying so much about being sick.”**

**JOANNA OUK**

you can’t hide that.”

Like most of the other teachers, Roth had no official teaching experience prior to arriving at LHS; she graduated with a degree in recreation and leisure. However, she epitomizes the teachers at LHS, who share a common bond of dedication, passion, and sacrifice for the school and its students, things that MacBain says are more valuable than a teaching certificate or degree. And although she would love to raise teachers’ salaries in the future, currently they range from \$16,000-\$18,000, with health benefits. For some teachers, like Savorn Touch, a Cambodian American, who raises two children of her own, the salary can be faith-stretching.





As the sole middle school teacher, Roth taught in the MacBains' living room for the first two years and describes her first couple of weeks at LHS as an "insane" experience, which included a crash course in teaching—preceded by dry-walling her classroom just a few days before school started. In addition to teaching, the instructors often counsel and mentor the students. Working with an at-risk student population, the teachers at times encounter gripping cases of abuse, violence, and poverty. During an incident last year, two students—a fourth-grader and an eighth-grader—walked into a local pizza store where they were held at gunpoint by a robber; fortunately they survived the ordeal. Other students have had to move into foster care because of abusive home situations. And most students, particularly the ones from Cambodian families, struggle simply with the adaptation of their families into mainstream American culture.

"I love the students at Logan because I can have an actual relationship with them," says Roth, who, rather than advising her students to escape inner-city life for good, instead tells them, "Go get yourself an education so you can come back and help everyone."

### Seeing lives change

Today, Cambodia struggles to regain its identity after being decimated by a long period of bloodshed. By some estimates, roughly three-quarters of the population is under the age of 30 and about half of the families are fatherless. Recent news headlines about Cambodia depict the atrocities of child pros-

titution rings and of families living in pitched tents on the country's landfills. And only recently have some of the parties responsible for the Khmer Rouge's crimes against humanity come to trial—small solace for these bereft people.

To close out the graduation ceremony before a potluck lunch is served, MacBain prays a simple prayer: "Father God, thank you for this year. We couldn't have done it without you, Lord. Amen."

At the end of the first chapter of the book of James, Christ's followers are instructed to care for the orphans and widows of the world. In our globalized world today, where the tremors of one nation's war send out ripples throughout the world, we may find this mandate more challenging than ever before. How can we care for all these people? And what is our responsibility to a country after it has been torn apart by war—perhaps even by the hands of our own country's citizens? For those who remain, what is their hope?

If there are any signs of hope, perhaps it's growing inside a shabby school building in the Logan section of Philadelphia, where folks from all walks of life are coming together to restore promise to a people who have lost it time and again.

"The reason I do this," says MacBain, "is because I see lives change. And that's what it's all about." ■

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The most important thing in my life is getting through school, helping my family when I get older to work, and being a good example to others. I want to show others who think I can't what I am capable of in life.

SAMANTHA YIM