LIPMAN: A jewel hidden among poverty

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia -- Cambodia's history is one of inconsistencies. The country's distant past was of ancient glory and the grandiose tombs of Angkor Wat, but its more recent history is filled with war and a bloody genocide led by the radical Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge regime, from which the capital city has yet to recover fully.

Before arriving, I'd heard rumors of Phnom Penh being unsafe for travelers; the city often sees violence toward both its own people and travelers, and impoverished children and limbless beggars line the waste-filled streets. But then Angkor Wat would come up in conversation, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and immediately Cambodia was transformed into one of Southeast Asia's most prized gems.

Regardless of how it is portrayed in the various guidebooks, the country's future has yet to be written and constantly teeters on the edges of success and failure.

That's where the Future Light Orphanage steps in.

For the last week, I have been living and volunteering at the Future Light Orphanage in Chom Chao Village about a half hour outside of Phnom Penh. The goal of the orphanage is to provide Cambodia's children with the techniques and knowledge to live a self-sufficient life in adulthood and impact their society in a positive manner.

The organization began as a mental health center in 1987 at the Thai-Cambodian border after Phaly Nuon and her husband saw first-hand the sufferings of fellow Cambodians during the Khmer Rouge reign. In 1993, she and 91 orphans were repatriated back to Cambodia, where she retuned to Phnom Penh to create the first FLO grounds. It is now registered as a nongovernmental organization, but is recognized by the Royal Government of Cambodia. Nearly all of its funding, however, is provided by visitors and a board of directors that hails from a Rotary Club in Hawaii.

Today, the orphanage houses nearly 300 children, ages 6 through their mid-20s and provides them with schooling, work, English and computer classes and lessons in traditional Khmer art and dance. Not all are orphans in the truest sense, but every child that comes into FLO comes from an exceptionally poor and dire background.

Children have a foster parent that sponsors them for $360 per year (it is now illegal for U.S. citizens to adopt a child from Cambodia) and many choose to visit their child. All expenses are covered for the

child, from the bicycle they ride to school to the clothes and food the orphanage provides.

The kids are polite, engaging, inquisitive and eternally grateful to see visitors, especially those who stick around for longer than the day. They are eager to practice their English and take nothing, especially education, for granted.

Working at FLO has been the most rewarding aspect of my travels. Each morning, we rise between 6:30 and 7 a.m. to smiling faces and shouts of "Hello sister!" as we walk through the orphanage grounds. I can't turn a corner without seeing a child's beaming face and outstretched hand just waiting to be held.

My days are spent in the library reading to young children or in English classrooms, helping the middle school-aged kids with their English pronunciations and spelling. Free time with the children is spent much like any other "normal" child back home. They enjoy listening to music (The Black Eyed Peas, Akon and Rihanna are some Western favorites), drawing and painting, playing sports or just hanging around and chatting with friends.

I've come to realize that for these children, as ironic as it may sound, being an orphan is the best thing that could have happened to them. The love and care FLO provides to its children is unconditional. The kids are surrounded by a support system of teachers, supervisors and donors that have only a desire to see these children succeed and help change their developing nation into a better one.

The children of FLO will become the writers to Cambodia's future, one hopefully of only successes.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world.

Visit her blog, Passport: The World, on The Advocate Web site,

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