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It Takes a Village

An American Heiress Aims to Rescue Cambodia by Giving Orphans a Family

By ANNE HYLAND

Here on the banks of the Mekong River, a New York socialite is trying to fashion Cambodia's future.

Her vision: to help shape the next generation of leaders for this small, corrupt and poverty-stricken Southeast Asian country, still recovering from the 1970s genocide that wiped out a quarter of its population.

Elizabeth Ross Johnson, an heir to the Johnson & Johnson pharmaceutical fortune, has set up an orphanage, Sovann Komar, on the outskirts of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh.

"I've been very, very fortunate in my life and I always wanted to do something larger with the gifts I have been given -- and I don't mean just financial. I mean my own personal internal resources," says the 58-year-old Ms. Johnson, who has invested millions of dollars in the project and says she is in it for the long haul. "I thought there was a way for me to be useful here."

Today, Sovann Komar, which in Khmer -- the Cambodian language -- means Golden Children, is home to 56 children between the ages of 3 and 8. They come from all over the country; some are orphans, others abandoned. And they all share the surname Sovann, or Golden. (Children in government orphanages are given the surname Rorth, which translates loosely as "belonging to the government.")

Sovann Komar operates under a family-oriented concept. It recruits married, childless Cambodian couples in their 20s and 30s to act as foster parents for five or six children at the orphanage until all of them finish high school. There are 10 foster couples. Each foster mother (the husbands usually have jobs elsewhere) is paid a monthly salary of \$175 to \$200 plus living expenses such as food and medical care. The package includes free housing in the Sovann Komar compound of wooden homes, a library and elementary school. By comparison, a teacher or a policeman in Cambodia typically makes just \$20 to \$30 a month.

The foster parents agree not to have any children of their own for three years after they start at the orphanage, to give them time to bond with the foster children. After that, they are encouraged to have only two biological children, whose living expenses are covered by Sovann Komar. Additional offspring are the financial responsibility of the parents. Each couple also gets a trained full-time child-care worker to assist them.

Ms. Johnson wants the children at Sovann Komar to become honest politicians, business leaders, teachers and philanthropists. In an interview, the normally publicity-shy Ms. Johnson says, "I'm not a trained social worker, but I felt what we should give these children are loving parents, a safe environment, lots of opportunities, lots of ideas and an amazing education."

A petite blonde whom the children call "Aunty" or "Grandma," Ms. Johnson first came to Cambodia in 2002 on a holiday. She met Sothea Arun and Arn Chorn-Pond, who had grown up as orphans after their families were killed by

the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. The two men, who share a passion to rebuild their homeland, had established a nongovernmental organization, Cambodia Volunteers for Community Development, to provide such services as free English language lessons and computer classes to help young people get jobs.

Inspired by their personal histories, in 2003 Ms. Johnson founded Sovann Komar, which she calls a "children's village," setting it up as a registered U.S. charity. Ms. Johnson hired Mr. Sothea, now 37, to help manage the project. (Mr. Chorn-Pond isn't involved with Sovann Komar.)

"Elizabeth has a good heart for the children," says Mr. Sothea, a thin, soft-spoken man, who has a photograph of the heiress on the wall of his office. "When she saw the orphans she cried," he adds. "She really wants to help these kids and to give them a good beginning."

As for Ms. Johnson's ambitions for his homeland, Mr. Sothea, who was orphaned at the age of 4 when the Khmer Rouge killed 36 members of his extended family, says he believes Sovann Komar can produce a generation of Cambodians free of corruption, unlike the leaders of the past few decades. "If you look at some of our leaders they came from a background of killing and violence. They are corrupt. We hope this young generation will make the Cambodian society better," Mr. Sothea says. "We have a great plan for the future and we will teach them step by step how to be good people."

Foster parent Si Len, 34, says he and his 29-year-old wife, Meas Savin, came to Sovann Komar to help build the kind of "society that we want to have...by raising some of the children." Mr. Si, who works for Digital Divide Data, a nonprofit group that trains disadvantaged young Cambodians in business skills, likes to joke that he and his wife had six children in two months. The children range in age from 3 to 5.

It's unclear how many orphans or abandoned children there are among Cambodia's 14 million people. A 2005 survey by Holt International, a child-welfare agency, put the number of child-care facilities in Cambodia at least 204; the agency determined that the greatest need for child care arose from children born to single mothers, parents who died and poverty. According to the World Bank, a third of Cambodians live below the country's poverty line of less than 45 U.S. cents a day.

"Many of the children in Cambodian orphanages, whether good or bad orphanages, are not orphans. They are there primarily because of poverty, and their families are not able to provide adequately for them," says Jason Barber, a consultant with the Cambodian League for Promotion and Defense of Human Rights in Phnom Penh.

Mr. Barber argues that, except in cases of child abuse, investing in programs that provide small grants or loans to raise family incomes is a better long-term plan than creating child-care facilities, even family-oriented ones like Sovann Komar.

The idea of a family-oriented orphanage like Sovann Komar isn't new. In 1949, Austrian philanthropist Hermann Gmeiner founded SOS-Kinderdorf International, now the umbrella organization for SOS-Children's Villages around the world that provide a similar family environment.

SOS-Kinderdorf has three Cambodian orphanages where children live with surrogate mothers. The mothers aren't permitted to be married or have their own natural children. Each mother, who is paid \$100 a month, rears as many as 15 children, although the average number is nine.

Geraldine Cox, a 62-year-old Australian who founded Sunrise Children's Villages in Cambodia about 15 years ago, runs two orphanages and hopes to open a third next year. The latter will be modeled on the family-oriented concept and cater to children orphaned by AIDS.

Finding surrogate parents is a challenge, Ms. Cox says: "It's very hard to get a Cambodian couple that doesn't drink, gamble, smoke and where the husband does not hit the wife."

Logistics aside, one of her biggest hurdles is more fundamental: instilling a moral compass in the next generation in a country that anticorruption advocate Transparency International ranks among the world's most graft-ridden.

"It's trying to make the children understand the difference between right and wrong in a country where people have done terrible things just to survive," Ms. Cox says. "It's a real challenge teaching the kids to understand that corruption

isn't the way to be successful. The problem is they see corruption in Cambodia does make people rich and successful."

While Ms. Johnson, who has four children of her own and cares for a Cambodian boy, says her efforts to establish Sovann Komar have been "tough," she's optimistic about making a difference. "I think the families feel very fortunate to be here and that they are part of something that is going to really create some change for the better," says Ms. Johnson, who visits the orphanage at least once a year. "Maybe we're not going to change the destiny of Cambodia, but in our own little way I think it will have a wonderful ripple effect."

—Anne Hyland is a Bangkok-based writer.

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