



CITATION

The Sir Edward “Weary” Dunlop Asialink Medal 2011

In our lifetimes, probably no country has had the extremes of human experience as Cambodia. From an almost agrarian Shangrila under an eclectic and personable king with an elegant queen, it was pulled into the horrific IndoChina wars. And then torn apart by a domestic revolution that consumed an estimated 1.7 million of its people in the Khmer Rouge “killing fields”.

Thanks to diplomacy and peacekeeping efforts, including by the Australian government, peace has been restored to Cambodia for more than 20 years. But the recent dark past still hovers, as we are reminded by the current trials in Phnom Penh of the surviving Khmer Rouge leadership. Cambodia’s people carry heavy psychological burdens and family disruptions from their ordeal.

There have been many aid programs for Cambodia, addressing sectoral needs large and small. Among them there is one simple one. For 15 years it has simply delivered love and shelter, surely the basic requirements for traumatised and isolated individuals.

It shows us how one person can make a big difference, just as one army doctor did with virtually no medical supplies in the wartime prison camps of Singapore and the Thailand-Burma railway.

Geraldine Cox was no big shot, as she will be the first to tell you. She grew up as a milkman’s daughter in Adelaide. She went to work for the Department of Foreign Affairs at the age of 25, and found herself posted as ambassador’s secretary in Phnom Penh. In 1970 it was a city whose magical time was ending, with the Lon Nol coup deposing King Norodom Sihanouk, B-52s bombing, and refugees crowding the countryside.

She left before the ghastly change of 1975, but as tends to be the case with first postings, and Cambodia in particular, a fascination and love for the country and the people stayed with her through her other postings - the Philippines, Thailand, Iran and the United States. And it stayed with her when she thought she’d quit the expat life and settled to a job with a bank in Sydney.

On a return visit in 1993, she became aware of the plight of the many orphans left by conflict and deprivation. With a friend she opened a small orphanage, and started soliciting small monthly donations from her circle of friends to support the children.

In 1996, Geraldine quit her Sydney job and moved back to Phnom Penh, working as an administrative for the Cambodian government in the daytime, and helping run the orphanage in her leisure hours. She secured a US\$20,000 a year grant for five years from the Chase Foundation in New York. Soon she won recognition of her local

foundation from the Cambodian government, and in 1999 the returned King Norodom Sihanouk awarded her Cambodian citizenship, one of only four foreigners so honoured during his reign.

It's an identity Geraldine wears proudly alongside her Australian one – and indeed she was made a member of the Order of Australia a year later, in 2000.

The network of Sunrise Children's Villages has been home to many thousands of Cambodia's children. The damaged ones from armed conflict may be dwindling in number, but needy children still arrive from backgrounds of abuse, neglect, abandonment, torture, slave labour, prostitution. Some have even been trafficked and sold into begging rings, even subjected to acid burn attacks and other deliberate disfigurement.

Sunrise offers a loving home environment, health care, and education, to begin the healing. Most have gone on to work, marry and raise their own families. Some have qualified in professions and trades, and several are here in Australia now studying at our universities. But the need for donations, from individuals and larger institutions, is large, and needy cases are still being turned away for lack of resources.

Geraldine's work has received much recognition, in awards and media reports, but she remains what she has been so successfully for the last 15 or more years, a surrogate mum for many thousands of Khmer children otherwise abandoned to neglect, deprivation and abuse we can scarcely bring ourselves to read about.

At least one of her old colleagues from the embassy in Phnom Penh recalls her as “a barrel of fun”. She now lives in vastly more basic household conditions than she did on the diplomatic circuit, but surely it is the same *joie de vivre* that animates her work, brings a smile to little wan faces in the orphanage, and coaxes support from some of the toughest political leaders and corporations.

There can be no more worthy candidate for this year's Sir Edward “Weary” Dunlop medal than this wonderful Australian (and Cambodian), Geraldine Cox.