

Singing God's Song in Cambodia

NOREN VANN KIM SAYS SHE HAS A "VOICE LIKE A FROG," YET THE LORD IS USING HER TO BRING THE ARTS BACK TO THE CHURCH IN CAMBODIA.

The next time you're in a mall or grocery store, look around you. Imagine that every woman over the age of 25 has lost a husband, brother, father or child.

That's the situation in Cambodia today, where death has touched every family because of the brutal regime of the communist Khmer Rouge during the 1970s. One of the millions of women affected by the holocaust is Noren Vann Kim. By the grace of God she has not only overcome immense tragedy, but also is helping others to find—and express—the joy of the Lord.

Vann Kim learned to cope with loss at a young age. Her father died when she was 6 months old. Her mother died when she was 8. And her grandmother died when she was 13.

With all the people she loved gone, Vann Kim focused all her attention on learning. Education became her god. "I worshiped education," she says, "and nobody could stop me from going to school." She worked from 5:00 a.m. until noon selling tobacco for her aunt's business yet managed to finish high school and train to become a teacher.

Vann Kim's first teaching assignment was in Kompot, where she met and married her husband, a medical assistant. Her life was comfortable, and she and her husband had three children, yet her childhood rejection haunted her. "No matter how much my husband loved me," she says, "I could never feel that love because of what had happened to me."

In 1972, Vann Kim and her family moved to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, to escape civil war in the region surrounding Kompot. Two years later, a friend invited Vann Kim to go to church.

"My family worshiped many gods," she explains, "practicing the religions brought by my ancestors from China and Vietnam, and mixing them with the Buddhism of Cambodia. But I took a chance to go to the Christian church."

Vann Kim was amazed to see people in church with their hands raised. "I thought they were crazy!" she says. "I just hid my face in my hands and laughed, peeking once in a while to see what they were doing.

"But from the sermon I managed to understand that Jesus is the one true God. During the altar call, the power of the Holy Spirit came over me, and I was drawn forward."

That night, Vann Kim gave her life to Jesus. Three months later, communist forces of the Khmer Rouge closed in on Phnom Penh. As the capital fell, the executions began. Nearly 3 million people died in the holocaust and accompanying war, famine, and terror—now known as the Killing Fields.

Vann Kim and her family were driven out of the city into the countryside to live in work camps. After more than a year of deprivation, two of her children died in her arms within a week of one another. Another child and her husband were separated from her. To this day, she does not know if they are dead or alive.

When the Vietnamese took over Cambodia, they emptied the work camps, releasing Vann Kim and others who managed to survive. Vann Kim walked 28 days barefoot through the jungle to return to Phnom Penh. She took many orphaned children with her and helped them to find work in the city.

But when the new government began reprisals against people

with Chinese ancestry, Vann Kim once again had to flee. Traveling through the jungles on the way to Thailand, she got separated from her group.

“Jesus, if You are there, please help me!” she prayed as she stumbled in the dark. Miraculously, a light appeared to lead her across the border to safety. “I just followed it,” she says. “It was as bright as a star.”

After six months in refugee camps, Vann Kim was allowed to emigrate to the United States. She settled in Chicago and devoted herself to helping other Cambodian refugees adjust to life in a foreign land, many of whom came to the Lord because of her witness. When a house church began meeting in her home, Vann Kim taught the new believers.

“I didn’t know anything myself,” she laughs, “but we invited the Holy Spirit to teach us. He taught me along with them.”

In 1989, Vann Kim’s friend Gioia Michelotti moved to the Chicago area to study at Wheaton College. Michelotti helped Vann Kim teach the Bible at her home group, and Vann Kim became Michelotti’s Cambodian consultant for mission projects at school.

One day the women realized they shared the same dream. In her work, Michelotti had already discovered how effective the Khmer arts were among Cambodians as a vehicle for God’s message. And Vann Kim had been praying for God to raise up Cambodian arts for His glory.

They felt God was calling them to proclaim the gospel to the Cambodian people using traditional Khmer arts—music, dance, drama, visual art and literature—and they partnered to form a new work, Cambodian Christian Arts Ministry (CCAM).

“I prayed for God to raise up Cambodian arts, but I didn’t know He’d pick me,” Vann Kim laughs. “My voice sounded like a frog. I couldn’t sing at all. But the Bible tells us you can

do all things through Christ who strengthens you.”

In 1995, CCAM moved to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and people began bringing troubled children for Vann Kim and Michelotti to care for. “I didn’t know God would raise these stiff-necked, stone-faced kids to be a performing arts team,” Vann Kim says. “When they arrived, they couldn’t even clap to the music. But we took them in, cared for them and trained them.”

Out of CCAM, the Cambodian Christian Arts Ministry School was born. “Now we house and feed all the students,” says Michelotti. “We teach them the Bible and show them how to depend on God. Although they learn many subjects in our school, discipleship is the main course, which goes on practically every waking hour of the day.”

Today CCAM has a group of 30 children who are reclaiming the arts for God’s glory, creating new works with a Christian message in the style of Khmer culture. The children travel throughout Cambodia proclaiming the gospel with music, dance, drama and testimony. Eventually, CCAM hopes to establish arts ministry schools in every province in Cambodia.

“God really changes these children,” Vann Kim says. “The fine arts students have confessed that they first came just to eat the rice of God and dance for the devil, but now they’re dancing and singing for Jesus.”

Vann Kim now looks back on her life and marvels at the amazing ways the Lord kept her in spite of overwhelming horror. When all her loved ones passed away, He provided for her. When the Khmer Rouge tried to destroy all educated Cambodians, He preserved her.

Today she knows why: He’s called her—froggy voice and all—to teach the children of Cambodia how to worship Him.

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