

LOUISVILLE priest helps create sign language

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"I always say, (Cambodia is) hot, dirty and corrupt -- but it's a good place to be. I'll be here until I die." CHARLES DITTMMEIER

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia -- With a hot sun drying a monsoon rain last month, Louisville Catholic priest Charles Dittmeier jumped into a motorcycle-pulled "tuk-tuk" taxi and zipped through loud, diesel-choked streets -- toward a cause this country has largely ignored.

Passing a sprawling market, tin-roofed food stalls and a cockfighting lot, Dittmeier entered a center behind high walls where deaf Cambodians communicate using the country's first sign language, which Dittmeier is helping to develop and teach.

It's been more than 12 years since the soft-spoken priest arrived to aid the deaf in a nation still emerging from years of war, genocide, poverty and corruption -- and one that before 1997 had no sign language, no deaf schools and no deaf organizations offering services.

Today, his Maryknoll Deaf Development Program, a \$500,000-a-year charity, serves as Cambodia's only program providing adult education, job-skill training, socialization, housing and sign language development to the nation's roughly 85,000 deaf people.

"Most deaf people here have no language beyond rudimentary gestures," Dittmeier said. "They have no language and have never been able to communicate with another person. They're totally isolated."

Dittmeier, a 69-year-old Kentucky native who spent years as a priest in Louisville, today lives in an apartment in the busy capital and spends his weekdays shuttling among several deaf centers in Phnom Penh and the provinces.

On weekends, he leads a Catholic parish in a rented Phnom Penh auditorium, filled with expatriats from 42 countries working with embassies, aid groups and businesses. "I've got five weddings going on right now," he said earlier this summer.

He laughs as he marvels at how his work in Cambodia has meant learning "things they never teach you in seminary," such as facing bribe demands from a notoriously corrupt government, dealing with power outages and having to evacuate injured staffers by jet because of poor hospitals. But he has no intention of leaving.

"I always say, it's hot, dirty and corrupt -- but it's a good place to be," he said. "I'll be here until I die."

Dittmeier's early work with deaf

Born in Louisville in 1944, Dittmeier decided to become a priest and was ordained in his hometown around 1970.

Persuaded by some older priests to help with deaf ministry, he spent nearly 15 years working in the Archdiocese of Louisville's office for the deaf, ministering to local deaf Catholics while also teaching at Angela Merici High School off Dixie Highway and serving as a chaplain for the Holy Cross brothers. He was fluent in American Sign Language after learning it growing up and was adept at using facial expressions and body language to help communicate.

"It was just something I fell into, and came to love," he said.

By the mid-1980s, Dittmeier was drawn to Asian missionary efforts among the deaf, spending two years in India and nearly 10 years with Maryknoll in Hong Kong. In 1997, he went to visit to check on Maryknoll missionaries in Cambodia.

"I arrived during the coup, and they were shelling the airport," he said, recalling the turmoil after current leader Hun Sen ended a power-sharing agreement.

He knew Cambodia was one of Southeast Asia's poorest countries. Even today, one-third of its population lives on 66 cents a day. Nearly half of residents never finish primary school. And 4 million to 6 million landmines still litter the

countryside, decades after the late-1970s Khmer Rouge rule left nearly 2 million dead from starvation, disease and execution.

Starting

from scratch

Because of decades of war, there were no deaf schools or deaf advocacy groups. And there was no sign language in the native language of Khmer.

Most deaf Cambodians were isolated, mistreated or neglected -- some parents refused to name their deaf children. They couldn't learn, couldn't communicate with anyone and rarely could support themselves, said Selwyn Hoffmann, an Australian who works as a coordinator at the Maryknoll center.

"Imagine having no language to communicate or express yourself," he said.

Cambodian Mao Mano, 27, said through a sign-language interpreter that she lost her hearing at age 4 when she was hit by a truck. Her father left the family, saying "he didn't want a deaf child," Mano signed.

Chansothy Yin, 26, born deaf in a provincial village, also struggled. Her father was barely able to feed her six siblings by selling drinks from his motorcycle. She couldn't speak to her family, using gestures for basic concepts such as cow, rice and rain.

"I couldn't hear or understand anything," she said, with Dittmeier translating. "I'd just be watching everyone else talking and observing what's going on. But I couldn't participate."

Dittmeier arrived in 2001 and began building his program at the same time that a French charity, Krousar Thmey, which means "New Family," began a school to teach deaf children, using Khmer-coded American Sign Language.

But the World Federation of the Deaf and linguists insisted that Cambodia deserved its own sign language. So with the help of foreign linguists and researchers, Dittmeier's program began recording and developing Cambodian Sign Language, documenting signs using video, recording gestures and hand shapes, testing them with deaf people and researching their cultural and linguistic context.

Recruiting students from remote areas

Today, the Deaf Development Program works to help the deaf over age 16 who arrive at the center or are recruited at villages in the remote provinces.

"The village chief will say, 'No, we don't have any deaf people. Just a crazy woman who makes strange sounds,'" he said. "And even then, many of the families won't let their children go to learn sign language; they're too poor and say they need them to work in the rice paddies. So sometimes we have to pay the families what their children would have earned."

Once recruited, the children start with several months of intensive sign-language training -- and it's often a transformational experience, Dittmeier said.

"They finally have real friends, somebody to talk to, and a way to learn about the world around them," he said. "It's amazing to see it."

Then they receive two years of nonformal education, learning reading, writing and math skills so they can read medicine labels, calculate purchases in markets and get jobs.

Their classroom illustrates those lessons, with young men and women sitting at narrow desks under walls covered in pictures of hand signs, scribbling in books and doing math problems on a chalkboard.

Many students live in Maryknoll hostels, with medical care, clothing and other needs provided.

They get job training in areas such as barbering, cooking or motorcycle repair, and there are also daily social activities. On a day in July, Dittmeier joined a group as they went to a soccer field built under a metal roof in Phnom Penh, the barefoot players clapping with delight as they played.

"The idea is to help them become self-sufficient, but a big part of what we do it just to give them the dignity and identity they lack in society," Dittmeier said.

Rights groups

reaching out

Because DDP is the only group of its kind in Cambodia, human rights groups often contact it for help when women are raped (a common problem among the deaf) or deaf residents are unfairly arrested or imprisoned.

Even when a deaf person with severe mental or development issues is referred, Dittmeier said he feels he has little choice but to help.

"We can either put them back on the streets or create a program for them; there's nothing else," he said. "That's why our staff has grown from 13 to 76."

A new anonymous charitable gift of \$750,000 a year will bring the DDP's total budget to \$1.2 million a year, allowing it to expand the number served from the current 500 to 600, add a third year of adult schooling and add more hostel space.

But getting jobs, even low-paying labor work, remains a difficult challenge for deaf people in a country without a disability law and where discrimination is common.

"They say 'Oh, you're deaf, there's nothing for you,'" said Chansothy Yin, who said she hopes to find sewing or cleaning work.

Making a connection

Still, talking with some of the deaf clients makes clear how much the programs help.

Soun Sonam, 22, who took a break from a fan-cooled classroom on the building's fifth floor, said in sign language that he was born deaf in a distant province among poor rice farmers.

"For years I could not communicate, and now I can," he said, noting that today he lives with his sister, who works in a sewing factory near the airport. He's able to ride his bike to the center.

Dittmeier, for his part, often pecks away on his computer at night in his apartment, writing reports or working on a blog about life in Cambodia, called "parish without borders," where he posts photos and comments on everything from Cambodian architecture, elections and gasoline smuggling to official misconduct, health threats, notoriously smelly Durian fruit and motorbikes stacked remarkably high with pigs, baskets of goods and entire families.

Once or twice a year, Dittmeier comes back to the United States, attending Maryknoll board of directors meetings in New York, where the religious order is based, and visiting family in Louisville.

He said he's planning eventually to share the leadership load at DDP but has no intention of leaving his vocation, spending days trying to find solutions to deaf Cambodians who are struggling to thrive.

"Ninety-eight percent of deaf people in Cambodia still don't know sign language," he said. "There's still a lot to be done."

Reporter Chris Kenning can be reached at (502) 582-4697.

hearing the pleas of cambodians in distress

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Learn more

To read Charles Dittmeier's blog, visit: <http://parish-without-borders.net/cditt>

To view the Deaf Development Center's site, visit: <http://ddp-cambodia.org>

How to help

To donate to Dittmeier's program, visit the Maryknoll website, scroll to the Maryknoll Deaf Development Program and click the "donate" button. It can be found at <http://www.maryknoll>

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