

#4 THE CAMBODIAN FAMILY

The Cambodian Family's Youth and Family Services Program began in response to increasing gang involvement of young Cambodian boys living in the Minnie Street neighborhood of Santa Ana. The neighborhood, which was already notorious for drugs, was getting even more dangerous. Hispanic gangs held the southern half of the neighborhood and Cambodian gangs rivaled each other in the northern half. In 1990, we made an organizational commitment to do our best to prevent the spread of gangs and juvenile delinquency amongst Cambodian youths. We designed a program to teach kids the negative consequences of delinquent behavior and the positive consequences of acting with good judgment. We received a small grant from the California Office of Criminal Justice Planning (OCJP) to provide this Life Skills program, enrolled 27 boys and girls, and began to teach them how to make responsible decisions about their actions and their lives. In order to engage the parents, we also taught the children how to read and write the Cambodian language. And to help the children develop a sense of self-esteem and identity, we taught Cambodian traditional dance and developed a performing dance troupe, called The Cambodian Family Youth Dancers. Within six months, we'd enrolled 100 kids and reached maximum capacity. Dedicated staff worked extra volunteer hours to make the program work.



Children learning in the Cambodian Family's computer lab.

Before long, though we met our contract goals, we began to see that our efforts didn't go far enough. We were always struggling to prevent the negative. If we were really going to succeed, the kids needed to become our partners, to develop their strengths and positive potential, and to see and choose viable alternatives for their lives. In crime prevention circles, there was talk of building resiliency factors as a means of reducing risk factors. Thus as time went on, we increased our positive focus as a way of more effective prevention of delinquent behavior. Through an equipment grant from the California Department of the Youth Authority, we created a computer lab with 10 work stations and began to work with the kids to increase their academic skills. We added tutoring, mentoring, girls community service clubs, sports, and arts and crafts. Today, our three-pronged community-based approach to crime prevention is to 1) build youths'

positive character strengths, 2) improve their academic skills, and 3) enable parents to provide their greatest support to their children by developing self-sufficiency and taking an active role in promoting their own families' health and well-being.

WHO IS THE CAMBODIAN FAMILY

The Cambodian Family is a grass roots, non-profit community-based organization helping refugees and immigrants become socially healthy by improving their lives and their community. For the past 14 years, we've assisted several thousand adult refugees from all over the world improve their health, learn English, find jobs, and adjust to their new lives here in America. And we've helped hundreds of neighborhood youths develop their positive potential, their social and academic skills, and their sense of cultural belonging -- while at the same time avoiding delinquency, gangs, and drugs.

EVOLUTION AS A NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER

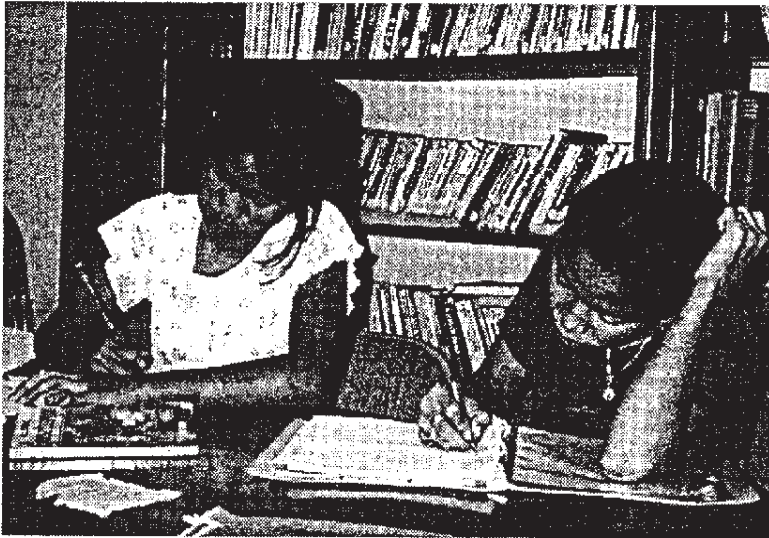
Since the beginning of services, in 1982, we've been working with children, youths, and families in the adjacent Minnie Street neighborhood of Santa Ana, an area about 1 mile wide by 1-1/4 miles long, where most of the County's Cambodians live. Surrounded on three sides by industrial buildings and on the fourth side, by single family homes, the neighborhood is unique for its ethnic make-up (25% Cambodian, 75% Hispanic), social isolation, economic deprivation, and criminal gang and drug activity. Cambodians have called it a glorified refugee camp. Nearly all of the 10,000 - 12,000 residents are immigrants and refugees, who face formidable obstacles to adjustment to their new lives in America. These include inadequate access to health care, economic instability, limited English and job skills, and the post-traumatic stress disorder still experienced by Cambodian refugees due to past trauma. The neighborhood has seven active gangs and is the birth place of one of most dangerous Asian gangs in California, the Tiny Rascals Gang, or TRG.

Our organization was born out of the Cambodian community on Minnie Street, when the Board of Directors who were themselves newly arrived in the country rented a small apartment and volunteered to teach English and to provide counseling and emergency translation to other Cambodians with more needs and less skills. Since these grassroots beginnings in 1982 and since receiving our first funding in 1983, we have continued to fill the gap in social services to Cambodian refugee families in Orange County.

THE MINNIE STREET RESIDENTS

Minnie Street is densely populated by refugee and immigrant families with rich cultural traditions. Nearly all are newcomers to America and come from poor agrarian backgrounds, with limited education and low socioeconomic attainment. Parents lack confidence and societal skills and are quite challenged to give their children sufficient guidance and support to develop healthy and productive lives. Feeling hopeless about their own futures, they pass on their low ambition to their children. Few youths have goals or dreams for their futures. With little to strive for, the youths are drawn to the

immediate gratification of neighborhood influences, media, and peer pressures, much of which is negative and compels them towards gangs, violence, school truancy, and early sexuality. Consequently, they do poorly in school: 50% of high school youths drop out, and early marriages and teenage pregnancy are too often considered acceptable options for young girls. Unfortunately, these may be early signs of poverty and public dependency in the next generation of Cambodian and Hispanic adults.



Children studying in the Cambodian Family's library.

Nor does the community find sufficient guidance in the neighborhood institutions: With the opening of a Santa Ana Police substation on Minnie Street, public safety increased, but police and other services are often inaccessible to Cambodians because of language or cultural barriers. Schools are too crowded to give sufficient personal attention. The recent opening of a church-sponsored learning center on Minnie Street has helped some Hispanic children gain services, but most children in the neighborhood are deprived of meaningful activities. At the same time, federal funding for youth development and gang prevention programs has been reduced, and competition for the remaining public funds and for available private funding has increased. Recently, we were forced to reduce our Youth Program staff. Meanwhile, Minnie Street residents face serious social challenges, and youths continue to grow up without the basic life and academic skills they need for healthy lives.

Welfare reform will still more dramatically impact this vulnerable and disadvantaged community. Over the past 14 years, The Cambodian Family has helped many hundreds of Cambodian families learn English, become self-sufficient, and move away from Minnie Street to safer and more prosperous neighborhoods. Those that remain have more than their share of obstacles to adjustment. Many have emotional and physical scars and disabilities that remain from the inhuman treatment received under the four brutal years of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, in which the whole country became one vast concentration camp. Families with some educational or professional background have made the adjustment more easily. Farmers from the countryside have had more difficulty overcoming their past trauma and learning the new mainstream ways. Thus the majority of Cambodian families living in the Minnie Street neighborhood remain dependent on some sort of public assistance.

With welfare reform, most of these families will be terminated from assistance and, without social and work skills, will have to become employed and find alternatives to Medi-Cal (publicly supported health care). The additional stresses of meeting the needs for basic family subsistence - food and shelter and clothing - will be immense. We anticipate less ability to prevent disease and maintain family health, decreased ability to take care of hygiene and nutrition, increases in spousal and child abuse, increases in emotional stress and depression (particularly in those who suffer from chronic post traumatic stress disorder), increases in family break-up and divorce, and decreases in their already low ability to parent children. The results of stresses on the youths could increase youth delinquency and violence, gang involvement and drug use, school dropout, sexually transmitted diseases, and teenage pregnancy.

Our Youth and Family Services Program is already essential to maintaining family stability and public health in the community, by providing an important and positive alternative to youths, to counter the negative influences of gangs, guns, violence, and drugs. We help youths develop tools to help them avoid delinquency and choose positive paths for their lives. With welfare reform, the additional stresses and the subsequent potential breakdown in public health will ultimately increase the community's vulnerability to crime. We must anticipate their needs and greatly increase our efforts to be a strong neighborhood resource.

First, we must help parents learn English, become citizens, secure employment, and find alternative health care. Second, when parents do find jobs and are unable to supervise their children, we must offer a safe and supervised place for children to go after school. Third, since older youths and young adults will have to become more responsible for contributing to family stability and income, we must teach and empower youths to become responsible and productive, through our academic and character-building emphases. And we must help the older youths find part-time employment while they continue their schooling and young out-of-school adults find full-time employment.

THE CAMBODIAN FAMILY BACKGROUND

With a staff of 22 employees, 15 volunteers, and 8 ESL instructors from Rancho Santiago College, we implement a comprehensive human service program. We've provided ESL (English as a Second Language) classes since 1982, employment services since 1983, health education since 1988, and youth activities and parenting education since 1990, when we designed our proactive Youth and Family Services Program to impact the increasing public health problems of the neighborhood. Our work with youths has received national recognition: In 1992, we were honored by the U.S. Department of Justice - Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention - for outstanding services in preventing juvenile delinquency. And we've been included in recent federal and state publications of model prevention programs.

The Youth Program we designed in 1990 was to be an extensive and proactive response to the escalating problems amongst Cambodians in Santa Ana: amongst youths, increasing gangs and delinquency, increasing adolescent pregnancy, and a continuing

high rate of high school drop out; amongst parents, social isolation, a lack of ability to deal with public services (schools, police, health), high poverty, and welfare dependency; and in the neighborhood, crime, violence and drugs. By 1993, it was obvious that, despite our best efforts and many achievements, our resources and abilities were too limited to keep up with the escalating problems in the neighborhood. We were losing the race. Too many kids needed too much help. We experienced first-hand the inadequacies of categorical and fragmented services when dealing with public health issues of youths and families. Our own capacity and resources were much too limited. We began looking for increased resources and secured additional grants from OCJP - from the Gang Violence Prevention Branch and from the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Program. And we began looking for other private and public partners with the expertise and resources to help us provide additional needed services. We were also realizing that to help Cambodian youths and families, we needed to improve conditions in the whole neighborhood.

In 1994, The Cambodian Family was one of 21 sites in the country chosen to implement a Community Planning Grant, funded by the federal Department of Health and Human Services - Administration for Children and Families -- Family and Youth Services Bureau. This was a significant opportunity to develop integrated neighborhood services, to bring about positive community changes and make the neighborhood a healthier and safer place to raise children. We organized the Minnie Street Planning Coalition, which brought together Cambodian and Hispanic adults and youths from the neighborhood and a broad-based representation from those serving them - including public agencies, private non-profits, education, government, and business. Guided by the Coalition, The Cambodian Family undertook an extensive, four-pronged study: 1) We conducted nine resident forums which identified issues of community concern: these were safety, after school programs for children, education, economic stability, communication and respect, and health. 2) We commissioned the Social Science Research Center at the California State University, Fullerton, to implement a survey of 200 randomly-selected adults and youths, to gauge their attitudes about social health and to reveal the paradigms through which they view their lives. 3) We collected archival data about local crime, poverty, school performance, and more. And 4) we inventoried services available to the residents.

As a result of this research, we developed a community model for change, to improve public health and help socially vulnerable youths and families develop their positive potential. We called this the Integrated Village Model, because it takes all of us -- public and private institutions and parents and youths -- working together in an integrated, collaborative way, as members of a community 'village,' sharing common goals, to bring about lasting positive change. And we began to integrate the principles into our Youth and Family Services Program. We joined the Santa Ana Police Department's efforts to open up a substation in a Minnie Street apartment. They received a three-year grant from the Office of Criminal Justice Planning and assigned two full-time officers to staff the substation, and crime in Minnie Street has been positively impacted. We also supported the efforts of the church group who recently found the resources to renovate some apartments and open an after-school homework center which many Hispanic

youths attend. Thus, at The Cambodian Family, while we have begun to serve a small number of Hispanic youths and families, we continue to focus most of our resources on the Cambodians.

OUR MISSION AND PROGRAMS

The Cambodian Family Mission for families is to help them develop the hope, knowledge, and skills to attain a better life. Our Mission for youths is to help them develop their visions for the future and attain the skills to turn their visions into reality. As caring staff, we create a pathway of opportunities and activities which encourage and guide families and youths towards a more fulfilling present and towards a better future. We strive to model in our own lives positive principles of behavior and interaction; we engage parents and youths as active partners in helping themselves; and we solicit the collaboration of other agencies and institutions in providing services to youths, their families, and the community. To accomplish our mission for adults, we provide counseling, parenting education, English as a second language classes, employment services, citizenship assistance, health education and health care accessing. To accomplish our mission for youths, we provide a comprehensive year-round, after school and weekend program with a variety of activities that focus on improving academic performance and developing maturity and positive character.

ACTIVITIES FALL INTO THE FOLLOWING BASIC OBJECTIVES

Activities for Youths: Each fall, approximately 100 children, ages 7-18, are registered into our Youth Program. They are assessed for needs and enrolled in specific activities. Most youths attend our center from 5 to 10 hours weekly. Youth Counselors track attendance, evaluate performance, and act as case managers for the youths and their families. Counselors get to know the families and take an active interest in their well-being. Our Youth Program provides a safe environment within a unsafe neighborhood. We provide opportunities for youths to participate in positive activities to improve school studies, stimulate healthy growth, teach personal responsibility, and facilitate communication and understanding between peers and between the generations.

OBJECTIVE 1:

Assisting students to improve their academic skills and performance: We recognize that children and youths need to develop their critical thinking skills and academic abilities. Yet 50% of the children in the Minnie Street neighborhood drop out of high school. Our academic objective has five components: computer lab, tutoring, Cambodian language classes, English language classes, and the reading program (a weekly visit by the Santa Ana Public Library bookmobile). We are planning to expand the Library's reading program for elementary and intermediate school children, and to recruit more volunteer tutors to help our participants. And we plan to upgrade our computer technology and expand our library of educational software, in order to increase opportunities for academic improvement and to technologically prepare youths for future careers. We have just begun a grant, funded by the federal Department of Health and Human Services, to provide intensive tutoring to high school-aged youths.

OBJECTIVE 2:

Assisting students to develop their maturity and positive character: We recognize that in order to succeed, children and youths need to develop their sense of inner worth and of personal and social responsibility. Our character objective helps kids build life or social skills, the judgment to consider options, the responsibility to accept the consequences of their acts, and the ability to communicate better and to solve problems peacefully. We also help young people see career options and develop dreams or visions for the future, so they have something to hope and strive for. Our character objective has seven components: life skills, peer mediation, counseling, Cambodian dance, creative arts, and mentoring. Mentoring is done in the traditional one-on-one style and in groups. Group mentoring includes two girls clubs for community service, one for intermediate and one for high school-aged girls, and a basketball team for high school-aged boys. Through this character objective, we help youths mature in character and judgment, while developing a healthy balance of the various dimensions of their natures: social, emotional, physical, spiritual, creative, and mental. And we help reduce the violence in homes and communities by promoting in children and youths positive standards for communication and conflict resolution.

Activities for parents: Families seek our help whenever they are in need. We also hold periodic parenting meetings to talk about youth and community problems and to educate them about welfare reform. We sponsor community-wide events for Cambodian holidays. And with other members of the Minnie Street Planning Coalition, we co-sponsor an annual cross-cultural festival on Minnie Street, called "A Day of Respect."

OBJECTIVE 3:

Assisting parents in becoming self-sufficient and in developing the ability to promote and sustain family health and well-being: The Cambodian Family has been helping refugees find jobs since 1983. We realize that with welfare reform, this function will become even more important to the community, because many will need immediate assistance in making the transition to financial independence. In helping families become self-sufficient, we will provide English training, job search workshops, and job placement. We will assist families seeking citizenship training. And we will provide families health education and access to health care providers. We will continue to provide parenting education to Cambodian families.

Our staff is culturally and linguistically qualified to help the Minnie Street residents. Our Youth Coordinator/Employment Services Coordinator is a Cambodian-American with 16 years of community service. Our Community Educator, who provides counseling and parenting and health education, is a respected Cambodian elder with nearly 11 years of service. Our Assistant Youth Coordinator, who helps administer programs and provides direct services, is a Hispanic-American who has worked with us for nearly two years; prior to joining us, she was an elementary school teacher. Our Youth Counselors are bilingual Cambodians; all but one have BA degrees, one is completing an MA in elementary education, another is working towards a teaching credential. All have

several years of experience teaching, tutoring, and counseling children. These bilingual staff persons are assisted by our Academic Coordinator, who has a Ph.D. in social sciences and many years of experience teaching youths and adults. On the administrative side: Our Finance Manager is a Cambodian refugee who has worked with us since 1986 and has successfully managed several million dollars in government and foundation contracts. Our Executive Director has been an ESL Instructor, has designed ESL and life skills curricula, writes our agency grants, and provides staff training. She has directed the agency since 1983.

CRITERIA AND MEASUREMENTS OF SUCCESS

Although our agency consistently meets or exceeds contract expectations and receives compliments on fiscal management, we feel we have a long way to go before we can call ourselves successful.

Through our efforts in developing and implementing the Integrated Village Model, we've been redefining what we mean by progress and success. It isn't simply meeting contract goals, but rather it's assuring positive changes in the lives of youths and families, so that they are prevented from entering the criminal justice system in the first place. And then it's ensuring that the changes are long-lasting, so that youths and families become responsible for achieving economic independence, health, and well-being. But we recognize that everyone begins in a different place, that participants come to us in different stages of risk, need, abilities, and strengths. Participants must be assessed and their progress measured case by case, in relationship to their individual situations. Some families are in crisis, and this must be dealt with immediately. Some need our partnership in learning how to cope with ongoing problems and challenges. Some are taking important steps by themselves, but need a hand or a pointer from time to time. Others are well on their way and simply need encouragement.

In measuring success, we distinguish between indicators of progress and indicators of success. We define progress as short-term achievements or steps along the way to longer-term success.

Generally speaking, progress with adults is demonstrated when they become more proficient in English, attain citizenship, find employment, participate more with police, schools, and other social systems, and become more effective parents (by taking an interest in their children's education, accessing health care, increasing family communication, etc.). Longer-term success is demonstrated when they retain employment, receive promotions, maintain family health and well-being, and when their children succeed -- with their help or support -- in graduating high school, continuing on to college, and/or finding worthwhile jobs.

Generally speaking, progress with youths is demonstrated in development of character and academic achievement. Character progress includes increased feelings of self-worth, acting with greater self and social responsibility, getting more involved with school and Cambodian Family activities, showing more willingness to help out at home, solving

problems non-violently, and communicating more effectively. Academic progress includes improved school grades, test scores, and computer skills. Longer-term success is demonstrated when youths develop positive visions for the future and take steps towards achieving the visions, graduate from high school, and find employment or pursue a career through higher education. For some, graduating from high school without becoming a teenage parent or performing delinquent acts will be accomplishments enough. But for others, doing well in school, finding meaningful life careers, and developing their own self-sufficient families will be the signs of success.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS STORIES

The families who participate in our program have multiple problems. Solutions are complex, and progress is usually gradual and success is only seen with sufficient time. Nonetheless, important achievements occur along the way, and we often have occasion to provide recognition and encouragement for work well done. Several times each year, we award youths for their academic and behavioral improvement, for good attendance in our activities, and for general helpfulness. We also appreciate more dramatic moments of successful interventions. Following are two specific examples.

One young Cambodian boy was doing poorly in his intermediate school classes and became very disappointed in himself. He had little understanding from his family, who felt he was simply not trying hard enough and harangued him to do better. This only made him more depressed. One day he decided to commit suicide. The school counselor became aware of his state and contacted us. We immediately responded. We counseled the boy, offered him support, and stayed with him overnight. We involved him in after school activities at our center. We provided translation for visits between the County's Children Services and his family. His parents were at first unfriendly, thinking we were interfering and blaming them for his problems. Progress took time. We extensively tutored and mentored the boy. His grades improved and so did his spirit. His family began to see the boy make progress, realized our role was a helping one, and became more supportive of him and appreciative of our help. The boy found that people cared about him and that he in turn could be helpful to others. This boy still needs help and support. He's not thriving. But he's overcome his extreme depression, and with time and encouragement, he now has the opportunity to develop his positive potential.

A young girl in intermediate school began to show signs of flirting with 'wanna be' gang members in the neighborhood. Several years earlier, she'd witnessed the gang-related murder of her father. She was withdrawn and performed below grade level in school. Our Youth Counselors began to work more closely with her and recognized her need for peer and adult support. One female Counselor organized a girls club for intermediate school girls and involved this young girl in the activity. Here she found belonging and support. She was elected president of the club and has begun to develop leadership qualities. As with the boy above, this girl is no where near success. But she's made strides forward.

With both families, as with so many others we work with, we must continue our efforts consistently and over a long period of time, if we wish to help them achieve positive

long-lasting results. Although our philosophy is to teach and empower the families to be responsible for themselves, the high degree of social, language, and other described barriers often make it necessary for us to intervene. Thus The Cambodian Family has often found itself functioning as 'adjunct parents' or as intermediaries between parents and the social systems they have to deal with in raising their children. These systems include schools, police, city, social services, children's services, health care, and more. We feel it's our responsibility as a community agency not only to teach skills and facilitate self-sufficiency, but also – when necessary -- to help solve problems.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Progress and success as we've defined them are not the results of quick-fix efforts. We must continue to seek funding sources who will work with us and allow us the flexibility to respond to youths and families in the best ways possible. Furthermore, we need enough funding to provide an array of services and to train our staff to assess needs and monitor progress on a case by case basis. We are only partially there: though we have a caring, dedicated, and talented staff, we don't yet have the funding to hire them full-time, nor give them all the training we'd wish. Problems in the community continue to evolve, and though we try to stay in tune with the changes, the problems don't wait for us to catch up. We are also dealing with ethnic communities with very different traditional backgrounds and life paradigms. Solutions that fit one group do not necessarily work with others.

OUR WORK IS VERY CHALLENGING

We must also increase our partnerships with other providers who have the skills and resources to provide necessary and helpful services. The Santa Ana Public Library sends their bookmobile to our center so that children can do more reading. Local school teachers, administrators, and counselors give us feedback about our participating youths. We are beginning a partnership with the local high school to provide intensive after school tutoring to their Cambodian students, so that together with the school, we can decrease the dropout rate. We have a partnership with the local community college (Rancho Santiago College). We provide students, classroom space, counseling support, and administration and they provide eight paid ESL instructors who teach 80 hours of ESL at our center each week. Additionally, we must continue to recruit dedicated volunteers to help our paid staff provide services, by participating as tutors, mentors, and life skills teachers.

As a community-based organization concerned with preventing juvenile delinquency and improving the health and well-being of the community, we see that our future success depends upon several factors: 1) achieving sufficient public and private resources; 2) having a well-trained and dedicated paid and volunteer staff, 2) developing service partnerships with other individuals and providers, both public and private, with whom we share a common vision and common missions for families and youths; and 3) maintaining the interest, support, and active involvement of the participants we serve, of the community they live in, and of the individuals and institutions which serve and govern

the community. Along with these factors, we must continue to honestly evaluate our progress and achievements, be both self-critical and self-supportive, and improve ourselves wherever we can.