



Clowns in Cambodia

by John Glick, MD - from the Foundation associated with the "Patch Adams" movie

They took us first to the killing fields. Thirteen clowns standing before a monument of thousands of human skulls, observed in stunned silence as a Cambodian man told the story of the maniacal slaughter of 2 million Cambodians from 1975 to 1979. He lifted a young woman's skull, showing us the hole left by the machete that took her life; the tree against which children's heads were smashed; bones and teeth still on the ground of the quiet countryside of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capitol city.

The river flowed quietly nearby. Small children begged from beyond a small chain-link fence. "Hello, hello...dollar hello..." Children...the tremendous number of children. A culture so ravaged, so impoverished, so degraded, yet here is the vigorous response, perhaps all one can do, when there is nothing else to do—make babies. A generation wiped out. A generation to take its place.

But so many problems: high infant and child mortality, no teachers or doctors (most were killed during the terror—to achieve a "pure" society, untainted by intellectuals or progressive thought). Cambodia is still politically disabled. Most human services are rendered by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from many different nations and religions. A quiet Buddhist country is now deeply dependent on Muslim and Christian charity, on good will and money from private organizations, individuals, and nations. Russia is helping rebuild the roads. Germany, the ancient temples. The US? Well, since the strategic importance has diminished post-Viet Nam, let's just say it's by people such as John and Kathy Tucker, such as David Harding, through which the most significant help is given.

Our week-long clown mission took us to several projects, schools, hospitals, and orphanages in Cambodia. Most of us were from the States. Two each from Italy and Chile. We were musicians, a magician, four doctors, and others. We were led by Patch Adams, his sweetheart Susan, and his brother, Wildman. Our tour was organized by Rachel Snyder and Paul Burton, who live in Phnom Penh and handled the logistics and contacts for us. Sonny Choum and Sophea Seng were our Cambodian guides and interpreters. We learned much through their stories and their willingness to connect us with the people of Cambodia in our play and conversations. From them we learned there is no clowning tradition as such in Cambodia, but the role of the fool is accepted and valued. We also learned how to eat spiders.

From the killing fields and the terror prison in Phnom Penh, we took a collective deep breath and were taken to Maryknoll Group Homes, the AIDS baby orphanage, a project begun by John and Kathy Tucker. Several years ago they witnessed a baby dying on the street in Phnom Penh, and immediately responded by making a commitment to never let this happen again. Now they have over 60 babies and young children. We played, danced, fed babies, and had fun. Coming from the killing fields directly to the baby orphanage was a deep experience. We were privileged and awed to care for and hold in our arms the fragile, ailing future of this culture. As John and Kathy told us, Cambodia's cultural instability makes it vulnerable to exploitation by—among many other things—the international sex trade, where the young women and children are infected with AIDS. Kathy has begun a project, "Patches of Hope," where women with AIDS are taught how to make quilts that will be sold in the US. The proceeds feed and clothe their families. Great concept. Straightforward and simple, all the money raised supports their effort directly. Kathy shrugs off the praise: "Seemed like a no-brainer to me."



We visited their studio in a small storefront on a busy city street. The mothers, a group of 15-20 tiny, bubbly, young women in sarongs, were delighted by the clowns, especially Steve, our giant 350 lb plus clown, who they each wanted to touch, laughing "Yes, he's REAL!!" We were each given a quilt.

"Friends" was a large school for street children, involving hundreds of kids from preschool to college age, teaching everything from ABC's to hairstyling, sewing, and mechanics. They even had a restaurant that trains students in how to completely manage a restaurant business. David Harding, the director of the project, had dyed his hair red for the occasion of our arrival. We played, danced, visited, got our hair cut, ate, chased around and performed for most of a day. We were, by this time, stinky clowns, too, as most of us had our luggage delayed till our third evening in Cambodia. But the children were eager to play, eager to learn. It is sad that most teachers of elementary school have not yet finished elementary school themselves. "Friends" people were all vibrant and passionate about their work. The Cambodians seemed at times to be a sea of faces, there were so many of them. We had a great meal at the restaurant.

Certain regions in southern Cambodia, near Viet Nam, have some of the most severe landmine problems in the world. Many farmers and children were killed or have been maimed from the residue of the Viet Nam war. The Kien Khleang Rehab Center treats most of those landmine injuries. We clowned at the bedside there. There was also a burn ward where a young boy with only three fingers played my accordion. Our magician clown, Lanky from Texas, did his show for a large laughing group of patients, staff and families. The clowns ran a 60-yard dash race with a Cambodian amputee. He won going away.

We visited a fabulous project begun by a group of French women who serve the children of families subsisting on garbage dumps. In the shadow of a mountain of garbage, they bring food, clothing, showers, and a school to the poorest of the poor. We emptied from our bus into a mass of children ready to party. It was clown mayhem. Lovely children in the midst of squalor; Pigs running free; the smell of garbage; the dirt poor hovels and the sweet, sweet faces of smiling children, all ready to play and dance. Bubbles, balloons, music, laughter!

There was a special-needs children's school run by a small group of Marist Brothers, a Catholic organization that teaches 85 children with physical disabilities, housing and feeding 60 of them. The spirit of this place was extraordinary. The children, all dressed in their blue uniforms, had disabilities ranging from land mine injuries to cerebral palsy to Down's Syndrome to birth deformities.

First we played outside. It was a free-for-all of goofiness and fun, including one armless and legless boy in a rapture of silliness with Patch. After a meal together, we sat while the children all sang songs for us, finishing with a love song. "I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes..." The brothers, very quiet and gentle in their bearing, taught the gospel of pure love. It was palpable and real. We wept, many of us, from the sheer joy these children generated and gave to us.