

“If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.” -Gandhi

Coming to terms with histories of political conflict has always fascinated me. A grandchild of Holocaust refugees, I grew up in a resettlement community for Cambodians fleeing the Khmer Rouge. These simultaneous experiences greatly impacted my views on how people chose to reconcile their past, and how past events are subsequently perceived by later generations. My main connection to genocide and persecution has always been the Holocaust; however, after I traveled to torture sites in Cambodia two years ago and spoke to survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, my views on persecution and injustice became pertinent in a new way. Cases of persecution and mass injustice have not faded; it is our obligation to address and remember these histories in the hope that their legacies can lead to future tolerance and peace.

Whereas education and constructive dialogue surrounding the Holocaust have become increasingly prevalent in both Germany and the U.S., intergenerational dialogue and education about the Khmer Rouge genocide remains largely silenced in Cambodia and within Cambodian communities in the U.S. Many survivors are haunted by the atrocities they experienced and have consciously chosen to remain silent about their pasts. However, their descendants desperately want to know what happened, and why. One Cambodian-American teenager I spoke with last summer quietly recalled, *“I’ve tried to ask my mom about what happened to her family, but she doesn’t want to talk about it. I know her parents were killed and they (the Khmer Rouge) raped her sister. . . but she doesn’t talk about it, so I’ve stopped asking.”* Sharing painful histories through dialogue and education provides a historical context that is essential to working towards future peace and tolerance. We can only move forward and learn from history if we confront it and share those histories with future generations. We must begin this process of remembering in order to better understand how hate and genocide can be prevented for future generations.

Project Proposal:

My two part project emphasizes youth led transnational approaches to teaching tolerance. For the first part of my project, I will work with Liz Keo, Program Coordinator of the Cambodian Association of Illinois (CAI). We will organize and moderate intergenerational therapeutic activities that build confidence and trust between Cambodian youth and adults in preparation for future intergenerational dialogue sessions that confront the Khmer Rouge genocide. The majority of the activities will be designed for Cambodian-American teens who are aching to know about their family’s past. We will document their thoughts through mixed-media formats including photography, performance theater, poetry, spoken word, and storytelling. Questions addressed in the programming for youth include *what* they want to learn from their parents, *why* it is important to them, *what* they want to do with the histories now, and *how* they can be used in constructive ways to attain future peace. We will also organize therapeutic arts and crafts activities for elder survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide who use the CAI’s senior drop-in center. Mental health issues are prevalent among survivors, and creative hands-on activities are healing mechanisms we will use as avenues to begin the conversation. The director of the senior drop-in center will lead the activities, posing questions that familiarize participants with the difficulties of reflecting on their past, as well as the importance and benefits of sharing their experiences with future generations. Questions include: As survivors of genocide and persecution, what do you want your children to know about your experiences? What is the importance in sharing your histories with future generations? What do you want to convey to your children about peace? As survivors of torture and violence, what does peace mean to you today and how can we achieve it?

Until recently, elder survivors refused to speak about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge regime. Wounds were still fresh. However, their descendants’ incessant desire to break the silence urged many to come forward, and the CAI believes that it is now time to facilitate these difficult conversations. CAI has long dreamed of facilitating dialogue sessions, but never

had the resources to accomplish this goal. I am thrilled that my project will provide a dynamic program with appropriate resources to meet the goals of CAI future aspirations. CAI expressed the importance of creative programming *before* the intended dialogue sessions in order to build trust and ease participants into the difficult conversations that will ensue. Our activities will provide a solid foundation of confidence and trust on which to prepare youth and elders to enter their first intergenerational dialogue sessions. Furthermore, my project will enrich their dream by bringing an international, comparative perspective that will help strengthen solidarity between Cambodian-Americans and Cambodians. CAI is eager to participate and take advantage of this multi-generational healing and educational opportunity. The organization offers numerous youth programs throughout the summer, and our workshops will be one of the choices youth can participate in, guaranteeing a receptive audience. The workshops will be emotionally challenging; CAI is well aware of this and is prepared to provide appropriate mental health support to participants as needed. Our workshops will also guarantee a sustainable legacy, as they will provide opportunities for CAI to identify individuals to participate in oral history interviews for their Oral History Archive. In this way, my project will lay the foundation for CAI to follow up with thorough interviews that will provide an educational context to sustain legacies and memories of the Khmer Rouge well into the future.

For the second portion of my project, I will travel to Cambodia to work with the organization Youth for Peace (YFP). Based in Phnom Penh, YFP provides peace education programs that confront the Khmer Rouge genocide. I will spend four weeks working with Khmer youth who are striving to confront and understand their country's past in order to implement peaceful solutions in the future. Sensitively, we will tackle questions and themes similar to those confronted in our workshops at CAI. The final product will be a published, cross-cultural reflective book that will provide perspectives on peace and genocide with contributions from both Cambodian-Americans and Cambodian teens. The books will serve as a discourse on adolescent transnational approaches to peace education, and will build bridges between the two groups, helping each one to know they are not alone in this struggle. They will be distributed throughout numerous institutions including YFP, CAI, Macalester College, the University of Massachusetts, the Jewish Council of Urban Affairs, and the Cambodian Resource Center in Amherst, MA. The book will also be digitized and incorporated into the website of Macalester's Political Geography course, increasing accessibility to the Macalester community and general public.

Academic Preparedness:

By May 2008, I will have completed a semester long research project about memory and the importance of remembering genocides to teach tolerance and prevent future conflict. This academic scholarship will build upon my personal interest of using painful histories for constructive purposes and will provide a solid foundation on which to pursue my peace project. Furthermore, I am an avid photographer. I have had five photography shows in MA, MN, and IL, and will incorporate my artistic talents into the workshops. Tangible and visual stimuli are often used to trigger past memories and help facilitate conversation. Therefore, I will take photographs in Cambodia, which CAI will use as stimuli to help strengthen the dialogue sessions.

Expected Outcomes & Future Impact:

Confronting histories of genocide will transcend generations and break silences. The preparatory workshops will provide a foundation of trust and confidence that is essential to the success of subsequent intergenerational dialogue sessions. Testimonies from the sessions will be recorded and transcribed for CAI's Oral History Archive with recording devices funded through this grant. The archive is part of CAI's National Heritage Museum, an educational and healing space used to raise awareness of the Cambodian genocide. Our book and recordings will stand as tangible testimonies that the Khmer Rouge genocide will not be forgotten and, more importantly, that Cambodians of all ages and in multiple locations are invested in working together to understand their history in order to stop the cycle of genocide and hate.