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Peace in Phnom Penh: Jim Cousins finds refuge and regeneration in the reborn Cambodian capital

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Peace in

Jim Cousins finds refuge and rejuvenation

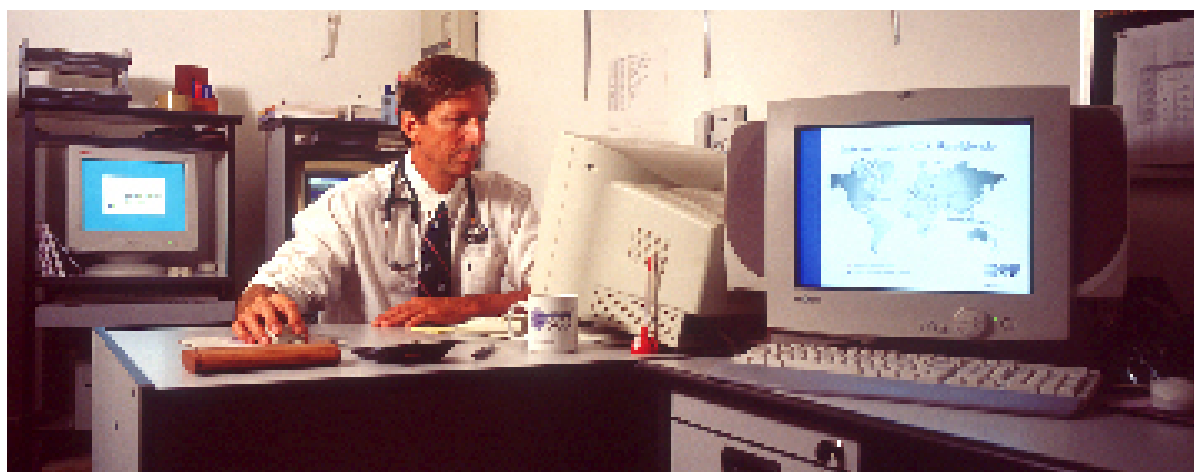


Phnom Penh

in the reborn Cambodian capital

By Frank Bures





Jim Cousins '75, M.D., was sitting in his emergency room office at Chestnut Hill Hospital at the end of another 12-hour shift—12 hours that usually ended up being more like 14 or 16. As usual, he was plowing through his endless stack of insurance paperwork. As usual, doubts were creeping into his mind.

Things were not so good in Philadelphia. Cousins was operating in a war zone; gunshot wounds, stabbings and beatings were all too common, and the number of uninsured people using the emergency room for primary care reflected growing problems with how medical care was being delivered in America.

As his shifts grew longer, the piles of insurance forms grew out of control. In eight years of work, Cousins had missed too

much of his two oldest kids' growing up. And his medical school bills (which he'd put on credit cards as an impoverished resident) looked like they would never be paid off.

Moreover, Cousins's car had been stolen three times, he had been robbed, his son Tim was mugged just before he left for boarding school in Switzerland, and his wife, Catherine, had been a carjacking victim.

Then came the call: go to Cambodia to start a hospital. It sounded like a refuge, an oasis, a place in a far-off land where things couldn't be any worse, a place where he could start fresh and where he and his family would be safe.

Safer, anyway, than in Philadelphia. A month later Cousins and his family were on a plane to Southeast Asia.



Jim Cousins '75, M.D., at work in the Phnom Penh clinic he established for SOS International in 1998. The clinic was opened at the behest of the U.S. Embassy after decimation of the country's physicians by the Khmer Rouge government.

It wasn't long after the latest coup, and just before new elections, that Jim, Catherine and their youngest son, Jerome, landed in Phnom Penh. They disembarked at Pochentong airport, which the year before had been looted after personal armies of several competing "prime ministers" fought in the streets. The Cousinses emerged into the sweltering air and were thronged by street kids and beggars.

For several years, Cambodia had endured the awkward arrangement of having two prime ministers—Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen, enemies who ruled together in a sort of truce since the 1993 election. But by 1997, the stand-off had run its course, and the two fought openly for control of the city. Oddly, when the fighting was over, there emerged not

one but three prime ministers, at least on paper. Except that one was in exile and the other was demure. In reality, Hun Sen was the new leader.

This was the country the Cousinses came to in 1998, a country that only months before had tanks rolling through the streets of its capital, no one in charge of the government, no parliament, no judiciary and very little security. It was a country that still bore the scars of almost 30 years of war.

Jim Cousins, however, was not in Cambodia to deal in politics. He was there at the behest of the U.S. Embassy, which wanted an international-standard clinic in the country. Only a handful of doctors had survived the Khmer Rouge, and the Cambodian medical system had never fully recovered.

The U.S. Embassy approached SOS

International about opening a clinic. SOS is a private company that operates clinics and evacuation centers in remote corners of the world, where companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) want their staffs to have access to internationally trained doctors.

Cousins had worked with SOS in the past. Twice he'd gone on several weeks' leave in Indonesia, where Freeport-McMoran, an American mining company, had hired SOS to open a hospital. The experience had been a great one for Cousins—and a glimpse of his future life.

After a second trip to Indonesia, Cousins stopped in Cambodia, where he talked to U.S. Embassy officials about opening an SOS post there. The talks evidently went well.

At Sea on the Rambo Express

The Rambo Express usually docks in Phnom Penh in the early afternoon after a six-hour journey across the Tonle Sap, a massive lake that runs down into the South China Sea. Sitting on top of the long, tube-like boat are rows of tourists, sunburned and wet, craning their necks to make sure they're in Cambodia's capital.

The reason they're sitting on top is that once in a while, the Rambo Express flips over in the middle of the lake. Other times the boat is hijacked, as it was once when Tim Cousins '02 tried to take some friends to see the ruins of Angkor Empire in the north. Instead, he and the others spent the day drifting around the Tonle Sap with their hands tied behind their heads.

The hijackers, it later emerged, were students at the tourism college.

As the Rambo Express approaches Phnom Penh's low skyline, thatched, platform houses along the river appear more frequently, and, closer in, more are made of cement. In the city, the boat passes under the long arc of the Japanese Friendship Bridge, which was built for the second time by the Japanese some years after the Khmer Rouge blew it up and left it in pieces: a monument to their madness. In the four years before Vietnam invaded and kicked the Khmer Rouge out, the city stood as a ghost town.

Today there is little evidence of the Khmer Rouge horrors along Phnom Penh's waterfront. The bridges are whole again. There is a nice park along the river lined with the flags of the world. The streets are paved, the shops are full, and the Internet cafes are busy. The Khmer Rouge prison and torture chamber is a museum, and the old colonial army officer's house is now a restaurant.

So where the French officer in charge once put his boots on the balustrade, sipping wine and surveying the natives in his charge, tourists from the Rambo Express now set their drinks and look down on the waterfront and feel a warm, new breeze that blows across the water into the city.

Below, the clinic's exterior. Sandbags and barricades form the perimeter of the adjacent U.S. Embassy. Below right, an amputee makes his way down St. 111 in downtown Phnom Penh.



In northwest Cambodia, the ancient temples and spires tell the story of the country better than any book could. They tell how great a power once resided here. They tell that Cambodia was once a great nation. They convey the awe that the Angkor Kingdom must have inspired in the 12th century, when it spread through Myanmar, Malaysia, Laos and Vietnam—almost all of Southeast Asia. At its height, the capital city housed and fed a million people.

The name Angkor was known and feared throughout the region.

This period of "Cambodia the rich and noble," as Chinese merchants called it, lasted from around 800 to the 1300s, when the Thai kingdom to the west invaded and sacked the capital. The Angkor Kingdom never completely disappeared but instead went into a long, slow decline, its might drained by regional powers—Siam to the west, Vietnam to the east and France from across the ocean. Over the years, the kingdom's seat slowly shifted to the south and east, where it remains today.

The ruins of Angkor were literally lost in the forest until European explorers stumbled across them in the jungle in the late 1800s. When they saw the crumbling ruins—77 square miles of spectacular terraces, temples and palaces—they could hardly believe their eyes.



Cousins failed French at Colby, more than once.

This seems odd, watching the man pick up his cell phone and say, “Allô? Oui, oui, Pascal,” and go on speaking the language fluently. It seems even stranger if you know that Cousins has a degree from a French university, a French wife, children with French citizenship, a French passport and a home in a former French colony.

Overcompensation? Perhaps. But in any case, the Colby years, not just the language requirement, were difficult for Cousins. To begin with, he didn’t get into Colby when he applied. But with friends there, he wanted nothing more than to go to Colby, too. So after a year at Southern Methodist University he transferred.

Because of a housing shortage, he was put into a fraternity house, which proved disastrous to his academic focus. Then he moved off campus, which didn’t help. Cousins was

young and undisciplined, he realizes now, but he had a great social life—until the dark day when notice came saying Cousins had to leave Colby.

“I worked really hard in high school to get into Colby,” he remembers, “and I didn’t get in. I worked really hard to get into Colby in Texas. Then I got to Colby and I had my dream, and I sat there looking over Johnson Pond from this beautiful room I had in this frat house. And everything just fell apart.”

He went south again, to the University of Miami, where he earned straight A’s. Before returning to Colby he also earned his commercial pilot’s license, took the exam for his real estate license, got his study habits in order, took a class in France and worked as an orderly in a Waterville operating room (under Richard Hornberger, M.D., who, incidentally, wrote *M.A.S.H.*).

With encouragement from then-Dean of Students Earl Smith, Cousins returned

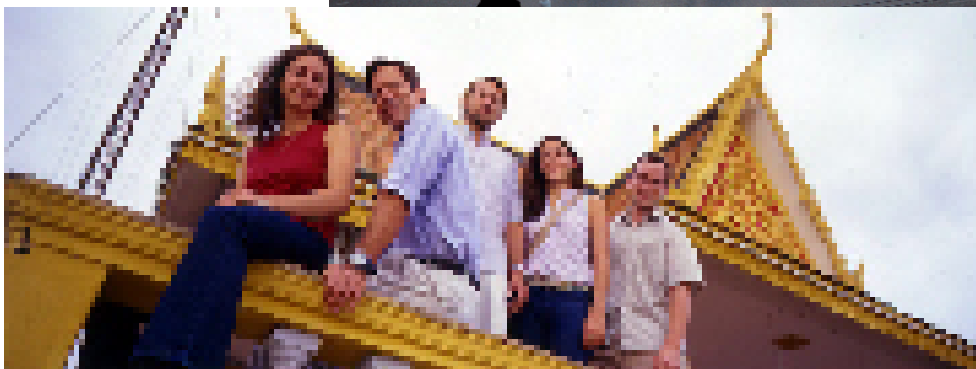
to Colby, on track to finish only a semester late. This time, he took a keen interest in French and in his French teacher, a young woman from Paris. This seemed to be the key he needed to unlock the language: l’amour.

Cousins graduated in 1975 with a degree in psychology and plans to follow his French tutor to Paris, where he hoped to get a degree in biology from the University of Paris, with an eye toward medical school.

The relationship didn’t work out, but his former instructor did introduce him to Catherine, who had recently returned from a year in Seattle.

When Cousins finished his biology degree, he and Catherine, by then his wife, moved to Miami, where he enrolled in medical school. They now have three children. Tim ’02 graduated from Colby last summer, Kim ’04 is a junior at Colby, and Jerome, who is 11, lives with his parents in Cambodia.

At right, late afternoon at the entrance of “Psah Thmei,” Phnom Penh’s central market. Below, the Colby contingent in front of the royal palace in Phnom Penh. From left, Kim Cousins ’04, Jim Cousins ’75, Tim Cousins ’02, Jean Preti ’02 and Carl Balit ’02, who is staying in Cambodia for the year to work in finance related to redevelopment.



Around the time Cousins was finishing at Colby, the name of the Angkor Kingdom rose again in Southeast Asia. This time it was Angkar, a shadowy entity also known as the “organization.” It was formed in 1960 and for years, even after it had taken control of the country, even after tens of thousands of people had died for opposing it, no one knew quite what the Angkar was.

In 1977, two years after he’d led one of the most brutal social reorganizations in human history, Pol Pot revealed to the world that the Angkar was in fact the Cambodian Communist Party, comprising high-ranking members of the Khmer Rouge. Eventually Cambodia lost 1.7 million lives to the barbarity of this new Angkar, before Vietnam invaded in 1979, chased the Khmer Rouge into the mountains and installed its own government.

Today the hole left in Cambodian society from that time still gaps, and that is partly why Cousins is there. The Angkar orchestrated the elimination of nearly the entire educated class, along with thousands of others. Teachers, intellectuals, engineers, farmers, diplomats and anyone who spoke French were killed as enemies of the Angkar. Of 530 practicing physicians in Cambodia in the early 1970s, only 32 survived. When the Khmer Rouge fell, 20 of those survivors fled the country.

That left 12.

Now Cousins, who seems to be here for the long haul, adds another.

Next Generation Finds Beauty and Sadness

Tim Cousins '02 drives along Phnom Penh's streets in his 1986 Toyota Corona, listening to Frankie Avalon and moving easily with the flow of traffic: an organic mass of undisciplined, slow and oddly amicable driving. Cars move like schools of fish through water. It's like a friendly symphony of forward motion. There is no road rage in Phnom Penh.

Cousins hardly seems to notice.

In the three months since he's been living here with his parents, Jim and Catherine, he's taken to driving like he's taken to everything else Cambodian. He even talks about moving here for good. "I go back [to America]," Cousins said, "I see people complaining about the smallest things. Here they don't complain; they just find a solution."

At the moment, Tim Cousins is working in communications for a non-governmental organization called Krousar Thmey, which in Khmer means "New Family." The organization works with disabled children (teaching Khmer sign language and printing Khmer Braille books) and runs centers to help some of Cambodia's 10,000 street kids get off the street.

One problem, however, that it hasn't been able to tackle is the massive pedophilia trade that has emerged in the capital city in recent years. "We were actively opposing it," said Cousins, "but our centers started getting blown up, and we started getting shot at, so we decided to cool it for a while."

Jean Preti '02 arrived in Cambodia a month after Cousins, her boyfriend, and soon found work with The Green Gate Center, coordinating a tutoring program for students at the international schools.

She, too, has taken a strong liking to Cambodia and even found a serendipitous connection to her research as a psychology major at Colby. She was looking into children who seem to have past life memories—odd skills, strange name recollections, fears of peculiar things, all of which disappear by age 5. And now in Cambodia she finds herself in a Buddhist country, where everyone believes in reincarnation.

"It's been surprisingly easy," she said of the adjustment to her home for the year. "The hardest thing is adjusting to all the contrasts you see here.

"It's such a beautiful place, but you also see a lot of sadness."

Four years after stepping off the plane at Pochentong Airport, after struggling to get his clinic set up, Cousins gives no thought to going back to his old life. That prospect seems to mystify him. "We came here for a year," he said, "and then we just never thought about leaving. It never came up."

Cousins is completely settled in his new home, just down the street from the clinic, which sits across the street from the heavily guarded U.S. Embassy. His clinic provides medical care to hundreds of workers from non-governmental organizations operating in Cambodia, to embassy staff and tourists who fall ill or are injured while in the country. The clinic is essential to a variety of organizations and both local and international companies operating in a country where the health care system was devastated by decades of warfare.

On weekdays, Cousins gets to work just before the clinic opens at 8 a.m. He sees patients in the morning, taking as long as he wants with each one—a luxury he could ill afford in the U.S. He regularly sees patients with malaria, dengue fever, typhoid, amoebas, parasites and other afflictions he would only read about in the U.S. In Philadelphia the emergency room had little experience with monkey bites. In Cambodia, such inju-

ries don't even raise a medical eyebrow.

Usually, Cousins makes it home for lunch, then blocks off the afternoon for administrative work at the clinic. He returns home around 6 p.m. Some nights he goes to International Business Club meetings. Others, he goes bowling with his family at Phnom Penh Bowling.

If it sounds somewhat idyllic, Cousins would be the first to agree. He is on 24-hour call, but that seems a small price to pay for such a life. He gets to use his French as much as his English, and his training in pediatrics and emergency medicine has proven essential for his new job. It's almost eerie how right he is for his new life.

"It was like everything I'd worked for came together," Cousins said. "I had this background that made this place ideal. And that's how I still feel. I don't know where else I could go that I could be happier and be doing more for so many people."

Not only was Cousins perfect for Cambodia; Cambodia was perfect for Cousins. It made him feel alive in a way he'd never felt before. In 1998, when he arrived, the Khmer Rouge was still outside the city. The pending elections were in doubt. No one knew what the future held. It was an energy he'd never known before, emanating from

a nation with a blank slate. "I felt more attached to the real world than I ever have," he said. "It was like being part of history."

Cambodia's history is still very much in the making, and Cousins has watched the country start from almost nothing and rebuild itself. He and his organization have played a small part in that rebuilding. Since he came to Phnom Penh, Cousins has seen many changes. He watched the first stop signs go in. (No one stopped.) He saw the first escalator installed. (People lined up to try it.) He saw the waterfront turn from a giant mud strip to a carefully manicured park. He saw scores of new restaurants and businesses open. He watched Phnom Penh go from a city where you couldn't go out safely after dark to a city with parks filled every night with people sitting, talking and strolling along the river.

There are more elections just around the corner and, in light of the changes he's seen and in spite of the many problems still looming for Cambodia, Cousins is optimistic. "People aren't going to want to go back to what was here before," he said. "I don't think they'll let it happen. There's so much potential to go in the right direction.

"The important thing is peace, and that's here."