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APYC 2015 SIHANOUKVILLE, CAMBODIA BRINGING TOGETHER 70 PARTICIPANTS FROM 14 COUNTRIES.

ChemThornin, opened the 21st APYC with these words; "Life is full of surprises; in 2004, when APYC was held in Cambodia, I participated as a single man and student. Now I'm married with a son and president of ICA Cambodia. IofC helped me to have a better relationship with my parents, brothers and sisters. Young Cambodians want to do something for society but often they don't know what to do or how to do it. ICA brings these people together to learn about absolute moral values and the quiet time and to do social projects to help those in our society who are having a difficult life. During our time together, I hope we can go beyond saying, "No thank you, I'm only interested in myself," and learn how we can better help our families and nations become examples for the rest of the world."



His Excellency Son Soubert, the High Privy Counsellor to His Majesty the King of Cambodia, and an old friend of IofC, spoke of the importance of honesty in our lives and challenged the participants to be true to themselves when they are surrounded by people who are pretending to be something else. He stressed the need for honest education because the youth will have to compete for jobs in the ASEAN job market.

He spoke of his own introduction to IofC when, 40 years ago, he was challenged by a young Indian to look at his way of life, which was in a way easy. He pointed out that he did not get any financial benefit from his involvement with IofC but instead he learnt to be true to himself, to stay humble and strong at the same time, and to not be afraid. He encouraged the participants to remain hopeful because they need to think of their future and the future of later generations. "In India, all the statues of the gods and of the Buddha have their right hand stretched forward, with the palm open, to say "Do not fear; not to fear what will be the future, but to build it from today."

Peter Heyes represented IofC Canada and is a member of the Board of Directors of ICA Cambodia. He reminded the participants of the fact that IofC friends from around the world had given money so that the youth could attend APYC. He said they did this because they believe the youth of today should play a part in making the world a better place. He challenged the participants to take an honest look at themselves and to see how they could have better relationships with family, friends, those they study and work with and to see how they can help to make their own societies a better place for everyone.

Hsu Shoufeng spoke on behalf of the International Council of IofC. He is a great believer in the potential of the youth in the Asia Pacific Region to play a greater role in their societies, starting

with themselves. He reminded the participants that they are part of a world-wide network that is making a difference around the world.

Quiet times and an introduction to the four absolute moral values were held each day. Participants spoke of incidents in their own lives when the moral values had helped to solve difficulties they were facing. Mayur Shah, from India, spoke of the problem he had accepting his younger brother's wife, who came from a different religion. He felt bitterness towards her when she wanted her husband to change his faith. At an IofC gathering in India he decided to write a letter of apology to her. Before he left for Cambodia, his sister in law and family visited his home. When they met she took his hand and kissed it. "We've had problems and pain for seven years, but now that has ended," Mayur said. "Religion often shapes who we are. We have so many things going on in our heads - anger, disgust, fear, joy. These words try to jump out of our heads - I should make joy come first."

Ed Espiritu, from the Philippines, spoke of the difficult relationship he had with his father; he always wanted his father to apologise. One day Ed got the idea to write a letter of apology to him but he could not mail it; another friend said he'd mail the letter. Two weeks later his mother wrote to say his father was dying. He asked God to give him two days to see his father and to apologise; God gave him two months. He began to understand what his father had done in his life to look after his family, moving from being rich to poverty. He said he was proud of his son and that he believed he was a good man. Two hours after this conversation his father died. Ed concluded saying, "It is possible to have a new kind of life if you begin to free yourself from the anger and hatred that is sitting in your heart. It is stopping you from being who you are. It is always a struggle, but having a quiet time will help you. I have been holding a quiet time book for over forty years and it has never failed me."

Chhay Sotheara, from Cambodia, spoke about moving from a happy life to one in which she felt like a family slave. When she was 17 she became very ill and she asked her older sister to take her to the hospital. She refused because she was worried about the cost. She went to the hospital alone and was told by the doctor if she'd come a few hours later she would have died. She felt bitterness towards her sister but, at APYC in 2010 she realised her sister might have had money problems or didn't have time to help. She wrote a letter to her sister saying that she forgave her. "We don't have a perfect relationship but my sister realised what she had done to me. I think it will take time and courage to make it perfect but we are trying."



During the session on Social Responsibility we heard from Chum Veuk and HirVirak. Virak is a business man and has given employment to many disadvantaged youth, helping them with scholarships, accommodation while studying and part time jobs. In 2004 he started a food

programme after noticing a lot of food wasted at weddings and seeing beggars without food. This programme still continues on a monthly basis with ICA friends. Virak takes young people to meet prisoners to learn from each other. "We inspire them and tell them they will be accepted by society if they change."

Chum Veuk told the audience that he came from a poor family. His father died and five of his twelve siblings were killed in the war. Because of his family's situation he was allowed to live at a Peaceful Children's Home run by Excellency Son Soubert. Soubert found money to send Veuk to the most expensive university in Thailand. It was a dark time for him; because he has darker skin people told him he was collected from the dustbin. After graduating he earned good salaries working for different NGOs but then he decided to repay Son Soubert for his kindness taking care of him when he was a child and now he works for Soubert's foundation - Khmer Foundation for Justice, Peace and Development - for very little salary. "My family think I'm crazy but I am doing what I believe I should do for society. IofC is about discovering yourself. If you don't do this you are totally mixed up. For me it is a moral obligation to help those who are less fortunate than we are. I am not a perfect person but I try to do good for society. Nowadays I have happiness. We need to have this feeling inside our heart."



Each day participants joined their family group for story sharing. These brought a small group of people closer together to share their life stories in a confidential environment. Workshops were offered on a variety of topics including the family, body movement, trust building, music and women and peace. A family workshop participant said, "It reminded us of our family and relatives, our origins and our relationships

with our parents. We put ourselves in our parents' shoes with a commitment to give them love and to share time with them and our families." This was the first APYC where women Peace Angels were created. At the end of our time together, those in the music workshop entertained us by singing songs from five of the participating countries. The night bazaar gave us a chance to buy something from another country. Pan Myat Mon, from Myanmar, sold items to raise money for flood victims in her country while other countries were selling to raise money to help pay for their APYC expenses.



A session on the environment allowed us to hear stories of initiatives from various parts of the world. Ed Espiritu spoke of restaurants in his part of the USA where owners weigh the food left by diners and the diners have to pay for this wastage. Seat Lykheang, from Cambodia, spoke of his work trying to help indigenous people protect their forests from illegal logging. In the session on peace building and healing the past, Huda Miftahul, a Muslim from Indonesia, spoke of his experience as a minority

when he came to Buddhist Cambodia for the APYC in 2004. During that time he was given food he could not eat and this led him to try to understand the minorities in his own country. He went to Bali where the population is mainly Hindu. While sitting with people from around the world he

was asked to think about the Bali bombing. He said, "I felt sorry that other Muslims killed so many people. For me Islam is a peaceful religion and I want to be peaceful with you. There is a lot of Islamic fear in the world so I have a big job to bring peace to our societies."

In "Conflict and Peace building" we heard stories from around the world and discussed what we could do in our own locality. We were given time to talk about the skills and talents we have, the things we are passionate about, and what are the needs of the world. We were taken through an exercise to show how these three things are connected and how we can use them to have a vision for what we are meant to be doing with our lives. We may feel we are alone with our vision but, if we reach out, there are people around us willing to help and support us. This led us into a time of visioning, seeing how we could create a project that would help us use our talents and passion for the benefit of others. ChauSophon from Cambodia is a keen photographer and loves travelling. She wants to promote social activists who are not appreciated by society and to spread their stories. "I will call my idea "Cambodia Hero"; anyone can join me in this venture."



The final day gave us a chance to show appreciation for our time together and for each other. Participants moved around the room, with a sheet of paper taped on his or her back. Others wrote words of thanks and encouragement on the papers. It was good to see participants finding a quiet spot to read comments, with smiles on their faces. Our time of evaluation of the programme showed that participants had learned a lot, grown a lot, become inspired to create change in themselves and around them, and to return home full of enthusiasm for what needs to be done.



A few comments:

It has given me confidence to say, "I love you" to my family.

We don't speak out because of a lack of courage; now I have the courage to speak with you and share with you.

I have so many challenges when I came to Cambodia. I see gentleness and graciousness.

Your parents have taught you well. I want my country to change so much.

I will listen without judgement.

I plan to use music as a way of expression and to spread the message.

I want a programme like this in my school.

I realised there is nothing better than to be in an environment where you are listened to and loved; we are appreciated.

On our return to Phnom Penh, some of the participants home stayed with local families. Farewells are always difficult but the outside world is waiting for us to return home to implement the ideas we have thought of for ourselves and our families, and for the societies we live in. We also have to think about APYC 2016 in Bandung, Indonesia.



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