



# HOPE & HEALING IN CAMBODIA

BY JULIA LABRIE

WITH FILES FROM  
CHERYL WEBER

## JOIN US IN PRAYER

Father,

*We pray for Cambodia. Our hearts are heavy as we hear the stories of abuse being committed against Your precious children.*

*As we inform ourselves about these dark topics and places, we know that they break Your heart too, and we look to You for hope and guidance.*

*Turn our anger and sadness into action. Help us not to forget about the pain we see, but rather fill us with the light of Your hope and strength, so we can build Your kingdom around this world.*

*Whether through awareness, prayer, giving or action, Lord, we thank You for all those who are committing themselves to ending the injustice of human trafficking and slavery, knowing that You said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."*

*Matthew 5:6 (NIV)*

*In Jesus' name,  
Amen.*

**I**n a room on the top floor of a Cambodian building there is a Bible, spread open on the bed, pouring its Gospel truth into the room—a space that has been extraordinarily transformed by the redemptive power of God. This room is home to a young couple, the loving dorm parents of the Cambodian boys living downstairs. God's presence is evident in the work being done here as these boys, at risk or survivors of sexual abuse, receive care and healing.

At Crossroads Relief and Development we have been anticipating the day when we could share with you the story of what God has been doing in Cambodia through our partnership with Ratanak International, and its Founding Director, Brian McConaghy. It's hard to believe that until recently, this room was a crime scene, containing evidence of sex crimes committed against Cambodian boys. In late April, final evidence was presented in the sentencing hearing of a 41-year old Canadian teacher, Christopher Neil, who sexually abused Cambodian children in this very room approximately a decade ago. Many may remember the name of this notorious sexual predator—he was the subject of the infamous "swirl face" photos, images

of a Caucasian man's digitally altered face, while sexually abusing 12 Asian boys. When experts unswirled the face and later identified the man as Christopher Neil, Interpol launched a massive international manhunt in 2007. Soon after, Neil was located in

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- DAVID SHELLEY -

Thailand and arrested by Thai police. He was sentenced to jail there for four unrelated charges of molestation and distribution of pornographic images that he committed in Thailand. At the time, RCMP Forensic Specialist Brian McConaghy was assigned to the file of Christopher Neil.

After leaving the RCMP in 2008, Brian devoted himself fulltime to Ratanak International—a Canadian Christian humanitarian organization that he founded. Its primary objective is to help survivors of sexual abuse and human trafficking in Cambodia. Brian continued working on the Christopher Neil file, determined to find the piece of evidence that would lead to the location of the crime scene. Looking for details like sun exposure,

building defects, architectural styles, and with the help of reliable intelligence, Brian was able to narrow down the possibilities.

In an interview with Cheryl Weber, Brian shares that when he took his investigation to the streets of Cambodia, as soon as he saw it from the outside, he said, "That's it! I knew it. That's the building."

He wasn't able to confirm this knowledge right away however; no longer working for the RCMP, Brian had no way of getting a warrant to access the building. It wasn't until 2012 when the building went up for sale that Brian was able to enter the building and conduct a forensic analysis, while the equivalent of a realtor showed one of Brian's staff members around: "I did a whole forensic examination under the nose of people who did not know what was going on" explains Brian. With this information, Brian was able to confirm that this was the place where Christopher Neil had abused the young boys in the "swirl face" photos.

Around this time Crossroads Relief and Development Director, David Shelley was in Cambodia to meet with McConaghy to review current project activities. As Brian told David of his unfolding investigation, David felt compelled to do something. David explains that, "Something kind of rose up in me. This is a Canadian, we need to get that building and buy it back. And I said, 'Brian, can we buy that building? Can we take it from a place that's been used for abuse and somehow redeem it? And make it a sanctuary for children instead of a place to be attacked and abused.'" With a beautiful picture of restoration in mind, it was settled that Crossroads Relief and Development would fund the purchase of the facility. This also meant that the crime scene and particular features of the building would be preserved, should investigators require additional access for forensic evidence.

Meanwhile Neil had returned to Canada in 2012 after being released from a Thai prison.



**ABOVE:**

Brian McConaghy, Founding Director of Ratanak International, gathers evidence at a crime scene in Cambodia.

**BELOW:**

Caring dorm parents now live in this transformed room, which was once a crime scene. A Bible lays open on the bed.

With the evidence Brian collected in the building, and with the testimony of one of Neil's victims who was found after an intensive search, Christopher Neil was arrested in Canada in March of 2014, and pled guilty to five new charges including two counts of sexual interference in Cambodia.

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In response to the sentencing hearing this past April 2016, Brian McConaghy comments that, "I don't think any sentence, even if it's 40 years—it doesn't fix the problem. You can never undo the wrongs that have been done... So this is complex but in the middle of that, there's hope. There's a sense that Christ can make right that which is fundamentally not right." And the hope, healing and transformation now happening in this building and its community through our partnership with Ratanak International is proof of this, that God truly does "[bring] utter darkness into the light" – Job 12:22.

We are filled with hope and faith as we hear of the God-inspired work being done in this crimescene, turned safe haven. The children there are attending school and thanks to compassionate house parents, they are feeling protected and cared

for. It will undergo further renovations as well, with plans to paint, repair windows and address other areas on the premises that need fixing. David Shelley firmly states that, "...it'll never be a place where abuse happens again. It will be forever redeemed."

To our faithful viewers, generous supporters, and those who are considering giving, you have been a part of an amazing journey. We are thrilled to share with you the story of how God has transformed not only a building in Cambodia, but the precious lives who are now healing there. Brian McConaghy's hope from this story is that it will show Canadians that "this is doable. Issues of justice are hard, but Canadians have a role to play."

On June 1, 2016, Christopher Neil was sentenced to 5 1/2 years in prison for child pornography offenses and sex crimes against children. With the time he has already served, Neil will serve 14 months in prison to complete the full sentence, which is 6 months longer than the Crown Prosecutor had requested.

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