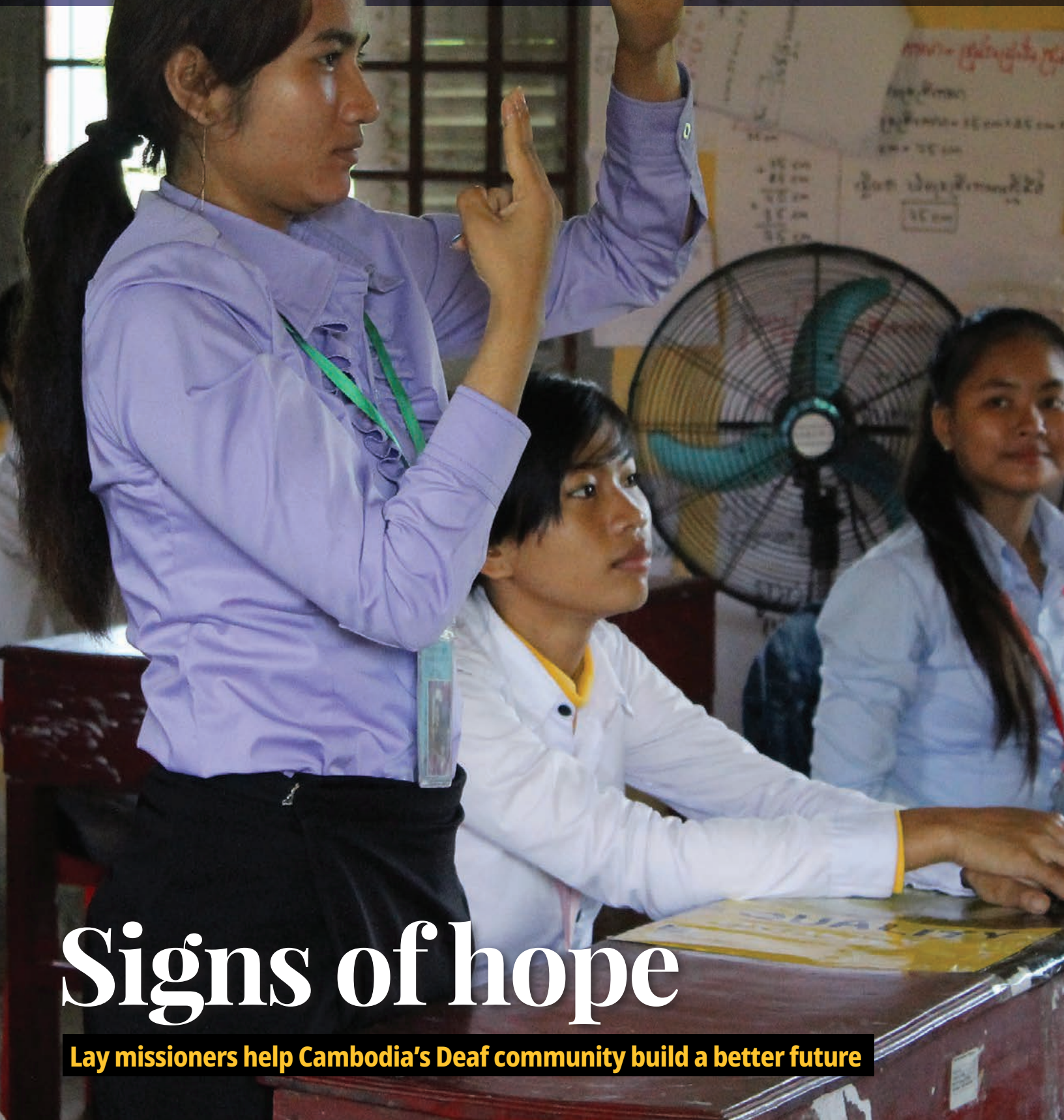


# VOICES OF COMPASSION



## Signs of hope

Lay missionaries help Cambodia's Deaf community build a better future



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PHOTOS (cover and above) BY KAREN BORTVEDT



# Come walk with us

**FOR NEARLY 45 YEARS**, Maryknoll lay missioners have uniquely lived their baptismal call to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ by "crossing boundaries of culture, nationality and faith to join [their] lives with



impoverished and oppressed peoples of the earth." They join their lives and walk with our global sisters and brothers whose courage, resilience and work for justice inspires us in the belief that a world of peace is possible.

I believe this extraordinary joint mission is only possible with faith as both anchor and guide. Amidst the rapid changes around the world in which the challenges of global poverty and injustice grow increasingly more complex, our faith grounds us in hope, allowing us to imagine and work for a better world. Faith inspires our fullest commitment to mission, through which we invest our whole selves in **building the reign of God and fostering change that has a profound and lasting impact** on the lives of those entrusted to our care.

That includes the Deaf community in Cambodia, which is featured in this issue, as it does differently-abled children in Bolivia, women affected by HIV in Tanzania and young people seeking a chance for education in South Sudan, women and men in Brazilian prisons and those benefitting from the soy nutrition project in El Salvador — "Just as you did for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

These communities and others have enjoyed long-lasting and mutually enriching relationships with Maryknoll lay missioners. These relationships and the varied ministries that have built them are powerful expressions of God's promise to always make the world anew.

We give thanks to all of you who also have faith that God's promise is being fulfilled at this moment. We give thanks for the many ways you choose to journey with and support us. Together we *are* the different world God longs to bring forth. As the mystics say, **"Look around. The world is full of God."**

What else could generate more hope? Peace and every good,

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
Maryknoll Lay Missioners



# Deepen my compassion, O God

BY HEIDI CERNEKA

Deepen my compassion, O God.  
You are the judge, not me.

My sister left behind home, family, culture,  
language  
When she fled to protect her life, her children,  
their future,  
As greed and power ravaged her nation.

My brother asked for refuge,  
A refuge promised by the UN and the U.S.,  
But we welcomed him with detention,  
Separation from loved ones.

Teach me to walk a mile in their sandals  
And be moved to indignation and action.

Stretch my compassion, O God,  
To embrace those  
Who see this reality differently.  
Move us beyond entrenched beliefs,

Inspire us to creative responses  
And justice that restores relationships  
And hope for all.

May those who knock at our door  
Seeking refuge and hope,  
Who are met with condemnation and walls  
by this nation,  
May they challenge us  
To live our baptismal promise to the Gospel,  
And may they judge us with compassion  
when we fail.

Amen.

*At the beginning of January, Maryknoll Lay Missioners re-established a presence at the U.S.-Mexico border after a 10-year absence. Heidi Cerneka is serving as an immigration attorney with community agencies in El Paso, Texas. Her presence and ministry are responses to the humanitarian crisis that has affected countless immigrants, especially Central Americans and Mexicans, who have left their countries of origin in order to seek refuge in the United States.*

PHOTO Normand Blouin/newscom.com



Right **Abby Belt** in Haiti has a new favorite mode of transportation—the moto.



Far right In language school in Bolivia, **Cortney Freshwater** and **Joe Miller** learn about *Día de Comadres*, which celebrates women.



# Poco, piti, pole—little by little

*Missioners learn new roles, guided by local wisdom*

BY VICKI ARMOUR-HILEMAN

**P**iti, piti, wazo fe nich li. Little by little, the bird builds its nest. That is one of the local proverbs **Abby Belt** has learned since arriving in Haiti in January. The proverb's message is particularly comforting on days when she is struggling to learn Creole. "I'm like a kindergartner when it comes to sentence structure

here!" she says. "Learning a language involves your brain rewiring itself a little bit."

Abby is one of 12 new Maryknoll lay missioners, most of whom spend part of each day studying the language and culture of their respective host countries of Bolivia, El Salvador, Haiti, Kenya, and Tanzania.

For **Joe Miller** in Bolivia, that generally means lamenting that there are something like 17 verb modes and tenses in Spanish.

**Cortney Freshwater**, also in Bolivia, finds that, while wrestling with vocabulary and verb forms can be frustrating, even when she doesn't quite get the words right, her efforts lead to a deeper kind of learning—"learning to trust in God and be patient with myself." Like Abby, Cortney has found that local wisdom is helpful in reminding her to develop that patience. When she is frustrated, her language teacher counsels *Paciente, paciente. Poco a poco*. Patient, patient. Little by little.

**Kevin McDonough** took a similar local wisdom to heart when he and his wife, Marilyn, arrived in Tanzania. Two Swahili proverbs he has learned so far are "*Pole pole ndiyo mwendo*"

(slowly, slowly is the way to go) and "*Haraka haraka haina baraka*" (hurry, hurry has no blessing). As he points out, "This of course is especially applicable to us as we struggle mightily to absorb a totally new language and culture."

It may be surprising that, even after spending 10 weeks in an intensive orientation program at Maryknoll, the new missioners engage in additional studies once they arrive in their mission countries. But Joe explains that this insistence on learning local language and culture "says much about the way Maryknoll, and increasingly the wider church, views mission."

In this understanding of mission, "missioners do not 'bring Jesus' to those places they go. Jesus is already present there." Joe therefore sees his ministry as primarily "one of *acompañamiento* — accompaniment," and his most important task is "to walk with Bolivians," a task that requires him to try to see the world through their eyes and ears.

In addition to becoming familiar with local languages, the new missioners explore and analyze the social, political, and economic realities of their host countries.

One of the most common themes in the places where missioners are sent is widespread poverty.

For example, when visiting a rural community near where she lives in El Salvador, **Jaynie Prior** discovered that some people make only \$1.50 a day picking coffee.

Half a world away, in Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, **Rich Tarro** encountered a similar reality. Many people in Kibera "don't have the means to earn a living, and ... lack access to basic human services." Both Jaynie and Rich report that many of the people they encounter lack running water.

While the missioners are struck by the difficulties of



**Rich Tarro** introduces himself (in Swahili!) at the Marungu Outstation of the Tsavo Children's Village project.

the people they live among, perhaps the most lasting and important lesson they have learned so far is that despite the problems they face, the local people are often surprisingly joyous and filled with faith.

For example, Rich acknowledges being saddened by the lack of resources as well as the recent terrorist attack in Nairobi, but he is also inspired by the small Christian communities he is beginning to get to know and their ability to "live out their faith life in the midst of so much need."

That sense of admiration for local people is echoed by other missioners as well. "I have been taught so much here," Abby says of her journey of discovery in Haiti. She points out that many people in the U.S. have "a single story" of Haiti. They know only of its poverty, its devastation after the 2010 earthquake, and its long history of political upheaval—one that continues in the recent protests in Port-au-Prince against the current president.

Now that she is present in the country, however, Abby has uncovered a more complex and nuanced story of Haitians as "a vibrant people with unparalleled strength and resilience born from slavery

and the fighting for freedom from it." She adds that "where one may initially expect to find an understandable bitterness, frustration, and chagrin, one instead finds hope, beauty, and generous wisdom."

This "generous wisdom" of the people they meet will no doubt continue to inspire the new missioners as they work with local partners to help address the needs of these communities. For now, though, they are learning that the life of a missioner is one of ongoing study.

As they conjugate verbs and adjust to a world very different from the one they come from, probably most would agree with the way Rich Tarro sums it up, saying simply, "I continue to have a lot to learn."

**Vicki Armour-Hileman** (class of 1988) is the admissions manager of Maryknoll Lay Missioners. She is the author of *Singing to the Dead* (University of Georgia, 2002), a book about her experience as a Maryknoll lay missioner serving refugees from Burma in Thailand from 1992 to 1994.

All photos courtesy of lay missioners.



Left Local children explain their creations to **Kevin McDonough** at St. Justin Centre for Children with Disabilities in Musoma, Tanzania.

Above **Sam Janson** entertains students suffering from albinism or blindness at a primary school in Musoma, Tanzania.

Right **Jaynie Prior** looks on as a young friend inspects an iguana in El Salvador.





*How lay missionaries have assisted  
Cambodia's Deaf community  
in building a better future*

# Signs of HOPE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KAREN BORTVEDT



*Left* DDP field worker **Tim Sreynich** (left) shows a young deaf man some of the letters in the Khmer Alphabet in Cambodian Sign Language.

*Below left* **Heang Samath** puts his artistic skills to use making masks for people at the International Day of the Deaf celebration in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

*Below* **Father Charlie Dittmeier** talks with some of the basic education students after class.

“I

remember hiding in a ditch, with some tree limbs over us,” says **Heang Samath**. “There were four of us together.

My parents, my older brother who was hearing, and me—the one deaf person. My parents told us we needed to be quiet.” The year was 1975 in Cambodia, the year the Khmer Rouge came to power, and Samath was 5 years old. For the next four years, Pol Pot and his henchmen tore apart the lives of Cambodians. An estimated 2 million, about one in four Cambodians were killed during this time—many of them murdered and tortured and others dying from malnutrition, disease and forced labor.

Samath, the longest serving staff member of the Maryknoll

Deaf Development Programme (DDP), will often recount his past experiences during the Khmer Rouge for visitors. He vividly remembers the bombs, the planes, the gunfire and walking for a long time and seeing bodies alongside the road. His family eventually ended up in Phnom Penh, where in 1979 they began to rebuild their lives.

Samath was not able to attend school. Schools were not equipped to educate a child who was deaf, and deafness was assumed to be related to a lack of capacity. Samath helped in the fields and around the house, using the home signs he had developed to communicate with his family.

Then in 1997 the direction of his life changed. The Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD) had sent field workers to Cam-



**DDP** Maryknoll Deaf Development Programme

**FAD** The Finnish Association of the Deaf

**CSL** Cambodian Sign Language



**Tay Vannarith**, a former Social Services Project manager trained by Susan Sporl, assists a deaf woman at the dentist.



*Center left* Students working on an arithmetic activity in the Basic Education Project at DDP—a project that missionary **Celina Campas** helped to develop.

*Left* Returned Missioner **Nancy Davies** plays a matching game with some of the hearing and deaf staff during a lunch break.

bodia to gather deaf individuals to document Cambodian Sign Language (CSL). Samath was one of the first individuals they met, and since the age of 27, he has played a key role in the development of the Cambodian Deaf community.

At the time, deaf Cambodians didn't have a formal sign language, and at this early stage, Samath and other deaf individuals shared the signs they had been using so they could be documented. Because of his artistic ability, Samath became the first CSL illustrator, meticulously drawing the signs for different concepts and words. Since then, he has been serving as a teacher for other deaf individuals and is frequently called on as a special deaf interpreter for those who don't know CSL.

Mastering CSL allows signers to form friendships with people across the country, access information through interpreters, and through this community advocate for themselves.

#### THE ROLE OF LAY MISSIONERS

Just as Samath has been integral to DDP for decades, so has Maryknoll. Over the years, six Maryknoll lay missionaries have worked directly with DDP and numerous others have assisted with various projects. Without this combination of the long-term commitment from the locals—both hearing and deaf—and the shorter-term, skill-specific support from missionaries, Samath, his colleagues, and the many other deaf Cambodians who have come through the program would not

have a documented language, legal representation, opportunities for education and employment, access to sign language interpreters or many other advances.

At the very beginning, Maryknoll lay missionary **Judy Saumweber** supported the work of the Cambodia Disabled Peoples Organization (CDPO), which was FAD's local partner in implementing the programs. Through her connection, **Father Charlie Dittmeier** became involved with the group. As CDPO faltered and was going to end the deaf-focused program, Father Charlie and Maryknoll became the official partners of FAD in 2001. The program began to adapt to better meet the needs of the deaf population and more closely align with international best practices.

Father Charlie, a diocesan priest and member of Maryknoll Lay Missioners, still serves as the co-director of the program. Under his leadership, the staff is currently composed of a quarter Deaf Cambodians, who have taught the hearing Cambodian staff about the need to respect Deaf culture, listen to the Deaf community and advocate alongside them for equality in society.

As the DDP mission statement says, the goal is that "Deaf people are accepted, respected and

included as equals in all aspects of Cambodian society."

When asked about the missionaries who have served at DDP, **Keat Sokly**, co-director of DDP, can name each one. "DDP has really improved because of all of them," he says.

**Celina Campas** was one of the first lay missionaries to join Father Charlie and served in the Basic Education Project. Celina covered classes and helped in the creation of new materials, sharing advice on teaching techniques, which **Thuch Sophy**, Basic Education Project manager, said she still passes on to her teachers.

While she was studying Khmer, Celina lived with **Ly Bolika**, who is currently the project manager for the Deaf Community Center. Lika laughs about how they would watch different soap operas in the evening to practice their English and Khmer. Celina would explain the ones in English to Lika and vice versa. Beyond the concrete contri-

butions



**Deaf community members** participate in an all-deaf soccer tournament.

the sign language books—and Samath's illustrations—practicing each sign until he could remember and reproduce them.

Like Samath before him, Sopor's life and story became linked to DDP when Susan hired him as a staff member to support the Social Services Project. He later joined the Basic Education Project and today is a sign language teacher.

**Tay Vannarith**, the first social worker hired for the program, explains how Susan brought her many years of experience as a social worker, helped him learn how to document cases and do consultations. Vannarith brought his cultural knowledge as a native Cambodian and his knowledge from his recently earned master's degree in social work. Together, he explains, they learned how to work with the deaf population, as this was new to both of them.

"Deaf people have problems, too," Vannarith says. "This was the first time they could really talk to someone about it because before there were no social workers that understood sign language."

Equally important within DDP are the Maryknoll lay missionaries who have helped in structural positions. **Nancy Davies**, class of 2012, instituted best practices in the finance department. Neang Rathary, DDP's accountant for the past 15 years, says that Nancy was always willing to help her with any problem she encountered. Sokly adds that Nancy "didn't just work in accounting. She

to the Basic Education Project, which currently works in three provinces serving around 50 students per year, connections like these form bridges between cultures and perspectives.

Another lay missionary, **Susan Sporl**, class of 2008, was instrumental in setting up the Social Services Project. One of the students who was able to benefit from her efforts was Lay Sopor. Sopor says, his hands at first struggled to make the correct shapes to accurately sign. At night, he would light a candle by his bed so he could still see

*Far left* **Eang Kimhorn** emcees an interpreter training graduation ceremony and leads the crowd in applaud as they welcome the next speaker.

*Center* **Lay Sopor** in his office, explaining something to his colleagues.

*Left* **Yun Sereyroth**, a former staff member, responds to a question in a workshop for the Deaf staff.







was a part of the Deaf community. She would come to the sporting events and cheer.”

Nancy was followed by **Russ Brine**, one of two missionaries currently at DDP, who works closely with the leadership team to ensure compliance with all funders’ requirements. Rathary reports that Russ helps her with developing reports and ensuring compliance with the donors, which is vitally important to DDP’s sustainability.

#### CAPACITY BUILDERS

As the most recent lay missionary to depart from DDP, I continue to be amazed by my colleagues’ dedication and perseverance in a society that struggles to understand them.

When I arrived, many in the Deaf community had little experience advocating for themselves. They tended to defer to hearing staff, and some were very shy when trying to communicate to visiting hearing people. Given the opportunity to train as tour guides, however, many became more confident, proving that with a few tools and some encouragement, they were perfectly capable of succinctly and powerfully telling their personal

*Above* DDP interpreter **Sorn Sreynuch** (left) interprets for a student on her first day in a job training project.

*Right* **Heang Samath** proudly displays his love of DDP at the International Day of the Deaf Celebration.

stories as well as the history of DDP to visitors.

While the goal was to ensure the DDP story was being told by the Deaf community, it also led to shifts within the Deaf staff. They began to question things and articulate their needs in ways leadership had never seen before. On my recent trip to visit Cambodia, when asked if they would be willing to be recorded, they were more confident than some of their hearing counterparts.

One of my colleagues and a friend, **Eang Kimhorn**, explained that a lot of the impact of lay missionaries goes beyond what happens in the office. She recalled how staff used to go out to lunch and celebrate my birthday with me, as well as how they came to my house to teach me how to make Cambodian food. She added, “If I had a problem that was really bothering me, I could stop at your desk in the morning, and you



*Left* DDP field workers **Nem Vanna** (center) and **Tim Sreynich** show a young girl in the province the Khmer alphabet in CSL, while the hearing field workers explain the project to her family.



would offer me some advice that always helped me resolve the problem.”

It was those personal interactions that made the most lasting impressions on both of us. Now that I am back in the U.S., I often find myself wishing I were back in the Deaf Development Programme office, looking forward to a day of working together. And it warmed my heart to hear that the feeling was mutual.

That to me is what being a lay missionary is all about: having the privilege to build relationships with amazing, inspiring, and world-shaping individuals and working with them to help shift the environment so that they can better share their skills and wisdom with the wider communities where they live.

The major shifts I witnessed would not have been possible without a strengthened Basic Education Program, sound

processes and systems, and the meeting of basic needs—with each new missionary building on the foundation left by those who came before, strengthened by the local staff who kept the efforts going.

As Keat Sokly puts it, “One of the most important things Maryknollers bring to Cambodia is sustainability. Maryknoll lay missionaries come to Cambodia and work with the local staff. That means first that they contribute directly to the project activities, and second that they build the capacity of our local staff. It means that, after they leave, our local staff can continue the work by themselves.”

As a result, many deaf individuals are now able to find work in hearing businesses, and some are entrepreneurs running their own small businesses. Equally important, our hearing staff members have become better allies with the Deaf community, working as allies to help the majority culture pay attention, listen, and understand.

What this all means for Samath, Sopor, Kimhorn and many other members of the Deaf community, is that DDP has played an important role in opening space for them to flourish, to embrace their full potential, and to advocate for themselves and future generations of the Cambodian Deaf community.

*Karen Bortvedt (class of 2013) is the recruitment and relationship manager of Maryknoll Lay Missioners. She served as a missionary with the Maryknoll Deaf Development Programme in Cambodia from 2014 to 2017.*

## Witnessing missionaries’ lives up-close

*Friends Across Borders trips opened my eyes to new realities*

*Right* In Cochabamba, Bolivia, **Caren Thompson** (right) helps lay missionary **Minh Nguyen** prepare bags of oatmeal and sugar to be given in a food basket to a group of elderly women called the *abuelas* (the grandmothers).



PHOTO Irene King

*Far right* **Caren Thompson** with **Hamesi**, a new friend at a center in Mwanza, Tanzania, where lay missionary **Susan Carpenter** worked.

#### BY CAREN THOMPSON

Over the past two years, I have gone on two immersion trips with Maryknoll Lay Missioners. These **Friends Across Borders** trips allowed me to witness up-close the good work missionaries are doing in Tanzania and Bolivia.

In 2017 in Tanzania, we met **Joanne Miya**, who had gone there after college. Thirty-six years later, she is still a Maryknoll lay missionary at the Uzima Centre in Mwanza, improving the lives of adults and children affected by HIV/AIDS.

We also visited **Susan Carpenter**, whose program provides meals for kindergartners, many of whom walk six miles to school without eating breakfast. The program also sends rice and beans home weekly.

I am still thinking about a very promising student, about 19 years old, who had a medical condition that had interrupted her studies. Although she was shy, she made a great impression on me, and I admired how she didn’t give up. With the help of a solar light, she was able to read after dark and continue her studies. Recently I heard that she has finished



PHOTO Laurie Rumpf

a computer training class.

Meeting her and others on this trip showed me that you don’t always have to do or build grand things. Touching one person’s life really is a big deal.

Last year in Bolivia, I witnessed the love and care lay missionaries **Sonny** and **Hong Nguyen** give to children in orphanages in Cochabamba. We also joined **Phuong (Minh) Nguyen** in packaging and serving basic food items to the *abuelas* (elderly “grandmothers”). They hugged and kissed Minh throughout their greeting. Because Minh brought us with her, they greeted us with love as well.

A trained hair stylist, Minh teaches women prisoners to cut hair, enabling them to make a living when they get released. One of the prisoners gave me a haircut—a Bolivian experience I will always cherish.

In Tacopaya, we were touched by the hospitality of high school students who welcomed us with homemade leis. They prepared and served a wonderful meal for us and taught us their local dance, drawing all of us in.

**Joe Loney** and **Filo Siles** took us high into a remote area of the Andes to visit families and check on a project that provides



education to children who do not have access to schools.

Observing firsthand the work of Maryknoll lay missionaries in both Tanzania and Bolivia has inspired me to look into becoming a lay missionary myself. When you experience that beautiful simplicity, you are changed forever. You not only learn about the culture, customs and people in a faraway land, you see Jesus there.

*Caren Thompson is a bank manager in California.*

**Friends Across Borders** participants join lay missionary **Hong Nguyen** (third from left) for meal preparation for a local food ministry.

To view videos about the Deaf Development Programme in Phnom Penh and Maryknoll lay missionaries’ contributions to it, please visit [bit.ly/mklmDDP](http://bit.ly/mklmDDP)

See the back cover for this year’s **Friends Across Borders** trips. Come and see for yourself!



# NEWS

## JUBILEE

This year's **Jubilee reunion** of classes with anniversaries divisible by 5 will be held **Aug. 2 to 4**.

## ANNIVERSARY

On **Aug. 15**, Maryknoll Lay Missioners will celebrate the **25th anniversary** of its founding as a separate organization.

## LOS ANGELES CONGRESS

Maryknoll Lay Missioners' Executive Director **Ted Miles** presented on "Mission-Driven Leadership: Make your Difference in the World" and on "Life Is a Mission" at this year's **Los Angeles Religious Education Congress**, March 21–24.



## WELCOME

Our newest missionary, **Lucia Andrea**, was born to **Kathleen Maynard** and **Marcelo**

**Maiorano** on Dec. 21.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING

**Paul Henderson** of Pastoral Strategies, Inc. is assisting Maryknoll Lay Missioners with a **strategic planning process** this year. To learn more or contribute ideas, contact [tmiles@mklm.org](mailto:tmiles@mklm.org).



## MUSOMA, TANZANIA

### PROMOTING GIRLS' EDUCATION

Lay Missioner **Liz Mach** helped to oversee the **funding and construction of a new building** for an innovative new program. This program is designed to assist young women from rural areas, who have often received inferior education in their villages, with a preparatory year that will enable them to continue schooling, avoid early marriage and early pregnancies, and help them escape the cycle of poverty.



## SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

### COMMUNITY PROJECT

Maryknoll lay missionaries of São Paulo came together for a **community service project**, preparing gift packages at the Arsenal of Hope. This Catholic house of hospitality serves more than 1,200 homeless men each day, offering food, housing, medical service and social inclusion activities. Lay missionary **Marcelo Maiorano**, who works there, was joined by his daughters Maelle and Cecilia and lay missionaries **Claire Stewart**, **Marilyn Kott** and **Joanne Blaney**.



## SAN RAMÓN, EL SALVADOR

### SOY SUSTENANCE

Ann Greig's Health Through Nutrition Soy Project celebrated its **25th anniversary** in February. Co-founded by Ann, a lay missionary since 1982, it provides soy milk, other nutritious food and educational workshops to more than 200 individuals and 50 families. "It meets basic needs and responds to the call of the gospel," said Ann. "This soy ministry has been made possible with the support of donors, a great soy team and Salvadoran friendships."



## MOMBASA, KENYA

### 20 YEARS OF HOPE

The Maryknoll Lay Missioners-led **HOPE** (Helping Orphans Pursue Education) Project of Mombasa is celebrating its **20th year of service** in the Archdiocese of Mombasa. It provides sponsorship and holistic support of orphans whose families have been affected by HIV/AIDS. In place of a party, HOPE is gathering former and current students in prayers and cultural exchange in April. Lay missionary **Coralis Salvador** is its project coordinator.



## A new mission is growing in Haiti

With the recent arrival of **Sami Scott**, Maryknoll Lay Missioners has begun a new commitment in Haiti. Sami is bringing her experience with finance and administration to the **Jean Marie Vincent Agricultural Center** in Gros Morne. Here she is watering cedar tree saplings for a reforestation program. The agricultural center teaches sustainable farming practices and runs a tree nursery, farm, fish tanks and a guesthouse. There are plans to add a bakery, preschool and block factory.

Sami is joined by new lay missionary **Abby Belt** (photo on page 4), who will be using her experience in education and sports in a ministry for youth.

## Research assists survivors of human trafficking

Together with colleagues from the Chab Dai Coalition, lay missionary **James Havey** (left) recently presented at the **Asia Region Anti-Trafficking Conference in Bangkok**. James is an advisor for the coalition's Butterfly 10-Year Reintegration Research Project.

The conference was one of many recent forums at which James has shared the top 10 findings ([bit.ly/Top10ButterflyResearch](http://bit.ly/Top10ButterflyResearch)) of the research. At the end of March, James and his colleagues presented their research at events in Alabama, New York City and Boston.



PHOTO: OU SOPHEARA



*Below: César Hernández shows off his breakdance skills.*

*Far below: Playing for Peace soccer training for the new season in March 2019*



*Far left: Maryknoll lay missionary Larry Parr walks with college scholarship students César Hernández, Yadira Quilzapa, and William Méndez in Las Delicias, El Salvador. San Salvador Volcano is in the background.*

# A play for peace

*In a violence-plagued community of El Salvador, Larry Parr is providing guidance and alternatives to youth.*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MEINRAD SCHERER-EMUNDS



PHOTO COURTESY Playing for Peace



Halfway up the back slope of San Salvador Volcano, **César Hernández** wakes up at 4 a.m. and leaves his family's home on a coffee plantation at 5. He makes the hour-long walk down the mountain to the community of **Las Delicias**, where he catches the bus for another hour's ride to San Salvador. On the way through his town, he must be careful whom he talks to. Not only are gang members watching everything and everyone, the police or military frequently come up the dirt roads "looking for gang members." To them every young man from the community is a suspected gang member who needs to be intimidated, roughed up or worse. Violence, including murder,

is common in communities like Las Delicias. While murders have decreased since 2015-2016, when El Salvador had the world's highest murder rate, disappearances have increased and the rate remains among the worst in the world. César makes this long commute to reach the Jesuit-run University of Central America El Salvador, where he studies mechanical engineering. That César, whose family has very limited economic means, is able to have this opportunity is due in no small part to the support and mentoring he has received through a youth program developed by Maryknoll lay missionary **Larry Parr**. Sometimes, when it is too dangerous for César to make the long trip back to his house

on the other side of the volcano, he even stays overnight at Larry's family's house close to the university. **CREATING SAFE SPACES** Larry has been working in Las Delicias for the past 11 years. Together with community members and with the support of Maryknoll Lay Missioners and a local community foundation, he has created a variety of programs designed to provide safe spaces and alternatives for young people so they can become educated, stay out of gangs and develop into leaders and role models for their community. The odds are stacked against them. "With all that violence in the community, it is not safe for kids to walk around alone,"

Larry says. "It is very difficult for kids in marginalized communities to have opportunities." Only about 40 percent of Salvadorans graduate from high school and fewer than 10 percent from college. Even though public education is free, many families cannot afford to pay for books and supplies or the 40-minute bus ride to the nearest high school. Schools in poor communities have few resources, so the education that young people receive there is far inferior to that in wealthier areas. To help improve educational opportunities for the young people in Las Delicias, Larry's youth program provides tutoring and mentoring as well as scholarships both for high

school and for university students. Just as important are community projects such as the community library, which hosts many activities, including sports, arts and community improvement programs. The most popular is a soccer program that is celebrating its 10th anniversary in May. Called **Playing for Peace**, it provides a safe place for young people from ages 6 to 21 to play soccer and participate in tournaments. Run by young leaders from the community who serve as role models and mentors, it

is more than a soccer program. "Our motto is 'First, God. Second, studies. Third, sports,'" Larry explains. "God is always first. We always pray and give thanks to God, and we always read the Bible before each practice. Then we focus on the importance of studying, and finally sports." The scholarship recipients help lead many of the program's activities. "I love teaching kids sports and arts," César says. "We not only help them develop athletically but we are also helping them develop their talents and teach them how to deal with their problems, family crises or difficulties they may have at school. These programs help to relieve their stress. Being able to help others gives me great satisfaction and joy. Together we will make this a better community." His favorite is the breakdance program, through which he passes on his own passion for breakdance to younger kids who just as eagerly embrace it. On a recent morning, as Larry, César and two other scholarship recipients walk

through Las Delicias, it is evident that many seeds have been planted. Along the way, grade schoolers warmly greet Larry and the college students, sharing their news, discussing progress at school and anticipating their next activities in the program. At the grade school, Ismelda Carballo, the school's custodian, has prepared a letter for Maryknoll Lay Missioners. "This program is a great blessing," she writes, "not only for my children but for many young people in this community. From the bottom of my heart, I give thanks to God and to all who, with their great hearts, have given us the opportunity to have projects like this one to help improve our school and our community."

Meinrad Scherer-Emunds is the communications director of Maryknoll Lay Missioners.

View a short video on Maryknoll lay missionaries in El Salvador at [bit.ly/MKLMEISalvador](http://bit.ly/MKLMEISalvador).

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Maryknoll Lay Missioners  
P.O. Box 307  
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CECILIA ESPINOZA  
*Friends Across Borders Manager*

**Maryknoll Lay Missioners**  
P.O. Box 307  
Maryknoll, NY 10545-0307

**Phone** 914-236-3474

**FAX** 914-762-7362

[friendsacrossborders@mklm.org](mailto:friendsacrossborders@mklm.org)  
[friendsacrossborders.org](http://friendsacrossborders.org)