

Tabitha Foundation (Canada)

Chairman's Report - 2007-08

It seems each year, in order to give an account of our activities, I am forced to repeat many of the things reported the previous year. I am thankful for this repetition since it is almost all good news. Because you, the donor, make all this possible, my first pleasant task, on behalf of the Board of Directors of Tabitha Foundation (Canada), is to once again thank you all very warmly for your contribution to our extremely successful work in transforming dreams into realities in Cambodia. Tabitha's effectiveness has gained continued acceptance and produced further expansion of our field work in Cambodia. Our Director of Field Operations, Janne Ritskes, reports that 32,364 families with 266,912 dependents (up over 50,000), were involved in our community development programs last year. In 2006-07 Tabitha began operations in one new province in Cambodia, Kompong Channang. The cottage industry program continues to provide work for some of the most destitute Cambodians, especially women. It allows them to work at home, while they care for their children.

The road to helping people in a country rife with corruption is rarely easy. Late last year it came to light that the program in Siem Reap had fallen prey to abuse. Janne was forced to shut down that province's program to eliminate the problem. It was a sad time. But new lessons have been learned and new controls put into place. Audits of other provincial programs have not, thus far, uncovered any further problems. This particular scam is not likely to recur. It is hoped that the Siem Reap program may reopen in the near future.

Last April, Janne Ritskes made one of her rare visits back to Canada. She was able to speak to many people into Ontario and British Columbia. Here in Ottawa, she spoke movingly at the 1st Annual Tabitha Foundation Fundraising Event. Our 2nd Annual Event will be a showing the touching movie "To Speak". This movie about a Cambodian family premiered at the Montreal Film Festival last year. I encourage you to visit our website at <http://www.tabitha.ca>, where you will find information regarding this event, as well as updates on the field work and programs, a cottage industry catalogue, and links to our four sister foundations. If you would like us to email you the monthly field reports and updates, please send us your email address. We would be pleased to add you to our private distribution list.

An amazing 611 houses were built in the past year by 75 teams with a total of 2025 volunteers (up from 376 houses and 800 volunteers last year). These house-building trips give Tabitha many of its most enthusiastic and solid supporters. The well digging program saw 997 wells dug for 4,985 families with 39,880 dependents this year (up from 845 last year). This is one of the most important initiatives to help families in need in a nation where only 10% have good drinking water.

Of course, as in all charities, it is our faithful donors who, by their generosity, provide the funds necessary to operate these wonderful programs. All of us thank all of you so much. Tabitha Foundation (Canada) received around \$157,000 in charitable gifts this last year, a more than 50% increase from 2006. We are pleased to welcome Bonnie Robertson, Jennifer MacKay and Glenys Galloway all from British Columbia to our Board. They, along with Gordon Longmuir, will represent the growing community of support for Tabitha in SW British Columbia.

We are only able to continue backing Janne Ritskes' beautiful vision because of the support of our dedicated all-volunteer Board here in Canada (especially the close-knit group who regularly attend our meetings and deal with the day-to-day business of running the charity) and the many additional volunteers helping us. Because of their combined efforts, nearly all funds raised go directly to aid the work in Cambodia. I know you will join me in giving them a huge and well-deserved "Thank you."

This year I must single out one longtime Tabitha supporter for special thanks. Lisbeth Mousseau got involved more than ten years ago helping with cottage industry sales. She has been on our board for nearly ten years and has headed both cottage industry sales locally and been the Tabitha.ca webmaster for much of that period. She has brought many supporters to Tabitha and continues to do so. This year Lisbeth celebrated her 80th birthday, instead of gifts asking for funds for house building. Thanks to her generosity, a family in poorest Cambodia has a new home.

Janne Ritskes and her capable, all-Cambodian staff have continued to produce miracles in the poverty stricken areas of Cambodia. We thank Janne, her staff, and the government and people of Cambodia, who have embraced and supported the goals of Tabitha. And once again I thank each donor. Please send your prayers along with your donations. May we all continue together, in grace, with this work in the coming year.

Respectfully submitted,

Larry E. Neily

Tabitha Cambodia: 14 Years and Counting

by D. Gordon Longmuir

former Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia & Tabitha (Canada) Board Member

When I first arrived in Cambodia in 1995, two years after UN-sponsored elections that produced Cambodia's first democratically-elected government, another impressive phenomenon was the rapid growth of "civil society". Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were everywhere, some nurtured by foreign friends of Cambodia, many more run by indigenous leaders, most trained in refugee camps in Thailand during the 1980s, or returning from countries of refuge to which they had fled during the Khmer Rouge period. Many of these NGOs dealt with human rights issues, others dealt with urban poverty, some of the most effective worked where the majority of the people lived – in the rural areas of Cambodia far from the capital.

Into this mix came Janne Ritskes, a seasoned Canadian aid worker with experience in Africa and less developed areas of the Philippines. She sought to do something a little different: to give to the poorest Cambodians, many of them eking out a living on the outskirts of Cambodia's cities and towns, a sense of worth and the wherewithal to improve their circumstances. Not surprisingly in a post-conflict situation, most of Tabitha's early beneficiaries were "single-parent" families. The key element in this effort was, and remains, an innovative savings program which sought to demonstrate that, no matter how small one's income might be, saving a small portion on a regular basis paid off in a remarkably short time. Their savings, plus interest provided by Tabitha, enabled them to purchase chickens or a pig or even something as simple as a wash pan or a cooking pot. Through donor contributions, moreover, these villagers were able, often for the first time, to own their own home and to have potable water close by.

As Ambassador in Cambodia from 1995 to 1999, I had frequent contact with Tabitha, supporting its early efforts through the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives and monitoring the security situation in which Tabitha had to operate during that fractious period. I had the joy of attending the official inauguration of housing projects, watching young volunteers, in those days mainly teachers and students from international schools in Singapore, in their amateur efforts to help erect simple but sustainable homes. And, when Janne and a few other Canadian women briefly took over the management of an abandoned orphanage, I was given the honour of playing Santa Claus – with little need of padding.

Since my retirement in 1999, I have returned to Cambodia several times, to help set up a parliamentary support project, to monitor the election of 2003, and twice to lead tours of Canadians through Cambodia and Vietnam, ensuring, of course, that we made a leisurely stop at Tabitha's beautiful handicraft showroom. Ah, yes, the crafts: the original objective was obviously to provide lucrative skills to a number of Tabitha's people, mainly women, through the cottage manufacture of silk products. Weaving homespun silk is an ancient Cambodian industry, and the gorgeous garments, quilts, table runners, toys, tapestries and Christmas decorations have become the main source of funding for the administration of Tabitha Cambodia. These goods started out being very simple in design and construction, but as the years have gone by, they have reached a high degree of sophistication. Recently, the silk has been augmented by silver products from a silversmith in an outlying province.

Tabitha has avoided the errors that some NGOs have made in Cambodia: since its inception, there has only been one foreign "adviser" attached to the organization; that is Janne herself. And the basics have never changed: savings, house building, sinking wells, producing cottage industry handicrafts – but the priority has been to extend Tabitha's reach across the country. When I arrived in 1995, Tabitha's work was confined to Phnom Penh. As security improved and funding came in, a branch opened in Siem Reap, near the ruins of Angkor. Today, Tabitha has spread its efforts across 13 provinces. Janne's spirit and indomitable optimism has prevailed: every facet of Tabitha's operations is now run by Cambodians, almost all of them women, who, for the most part, have shown remarkable honesty and integrity in their management of Tabitha's projects.

And who knew, in 1994, that Janne would still be there, well settled in what has become her adopted country. In 1999, she adopted an infant whom she named Miriam – now a bright and precocious nine-year-old. She petitioned the government for Cambodian citizenship and became only the second foreigner to be accorded that honour. My love and respect for this great lady prompted me a couple of years ago to support the initiative of Tabitha Foundation in Canada to request the patronage of Her Excellency the Governor General, an honour freely accorded within weeks of the Foundation's application.

Another remarkable aspect of which Tabitha should be proud is the wide international support it has garnered, from Australia to the UK to the US to Singapore, with supportive sponsors worldwide. When I visited Phnom Penh last fall, I was pleased to have lunch with Janne, along with three volunteers who had just finished a house building project – three delightful women, old friends who had met in Singapore years ago: one each from the US, South Africa and the UK. All took great pride in the accomplishments of Tabitha over these short 14 years.

Tabitha will have its challenges, since Cambodia is, still, a desperately poor country with great needs. It suffers from weak governance, a poorly diversified economy, corruption and climate of impunity. On the other hand, Tabitha is extremely positively viewed by the Royal Government of Cambodia and its security and stability is virtually guaranteed as the country moves into a more certain future.