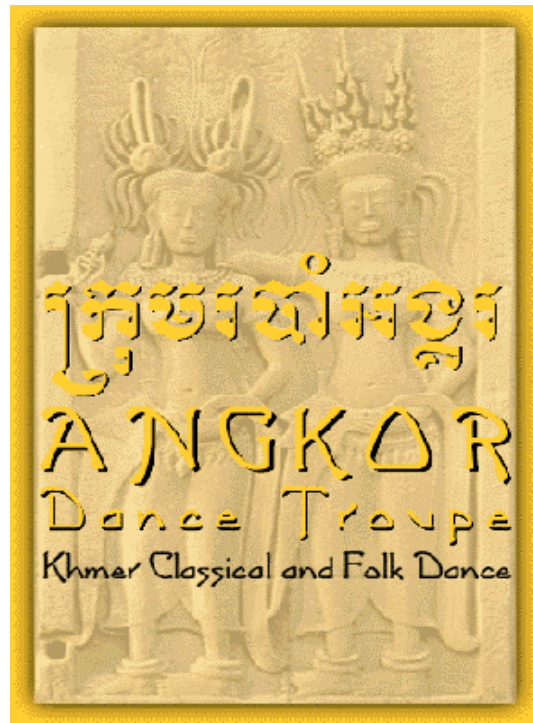


*Community Archives: Angkor Youth Dance Program
A Taste of Cambodia in Lowell*



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Imagine having to relocate from your country of origin to another country with a language and culture different from your own. How would you adapt? Various research studies show that the immigrant experience is hard. Immigrants are at higher risk for physical and mental illness (BBC News, 2003). Moreover, the immigrant poverty rate averages 45 percent higher than the poverty rate for natives (Federation for American Immigration Reform, 2003). Even when welfare benefits are available, language and other barriers can discourage the use of such services (Welfare Information Network, 2002). Becoming used to one's new culture often results in changes in diets, lifestyles, and can lead to the deterioration of traditional social networks. These changes have been associated with poorer health outcomes (Eisler & Hersen, 2000). Marginalization can result if individuals do not or cannot identify with either their culture of origin or with the culture of their new home (Dalton et, al. 2001).

These problems are especially important for all of us to consider in Lowell. Lowell has a long history of welcoming immigrants and now has the second largest Cambodian population in the United States (Silka & West, 2001). Southeast Asians face the problems encountered by many other immigrants such as racism, alienation and vulnerability (BBC News, 2003), but they also face the additional challenges of having to live with the aftermath of a devastating war in their home country. The shadows that result may prevent this group from identifying with the culture of their origin and the dominant culture.

How can these groups fight the dark memories of war? How can they contribute to their new home and feel appreciated by all of their neighbors? Asian cultures tend to score as the most collectivistic cultures (Dalton et, al. 2001). Collectivist cultures tend to value interdependence, group achievement and shared emotions. The field of community psychology is based on interdependence. Community psychology is the branch of psychology concerned with connecting people to their community. Community psychology examines the interaction of individuals and communities such as, networks of friends, extended family, workplace, school, voluntary associations, religious congregation or spiritual community (Dalton et, al. 2001).

Innovative Programs that promote the involvement of entire families and communities are essential when working with collectivist cultures such as Southeast Asian cultures. Therefore innovative programs can be an important resource for addressing the problems that the Southeast Asian youth of Lowell face today. An example of this sort of program is the *Angkor Youth Dance After-School Program*.

Cambodian refugees of the Khmer Rouge genocide formed the Angkor Dance Troupe in



1986. After settling in Lowell Mass, they brought a passion to their new country to carry on their cherished traditions, teach these traditions to others and preserve them for future generations of all cultures (Angkor Dance Troupe, 2002).

The Angkor Youth Dance Program is an effort to help Southeast Asian children and teens identify with the culture from which they come. Erick Erikson's psychosocial stages allow us to understand our social development and our need for self-identification

(Plotnik, 1996). His stages of development help us understand the impact of events from birth through adulthood. These ages comply with those of the Angkor Youth Dance Students aged 5-17 years. The first stage is Trust vs. Mistrust. Here Erikson claims that individuals need to establish “basic trust” with the people they love; if not, they will become mistrustful and have difficulty dealing with the second stage that will mean shame and doubt will succeed over autonomy. The children of war torn countries can be confused and mistrustful towards others as an outcome of their parent’s trauma and abuse of trust by leaders of the Khmer Rouge.

It is important to consider the collectivist viewpoint when examining Erikson’s second stage, autonomy versus shame and doubt. To be autonomous within cultures that value interdependence means to take initiative within the group. On the other hand, American Culture views autonomy as a sense of independence. Southeast Asian children and teens in Lowell have had their identities torn due to the outcomes of war and acculturation. These students may feel torn between two cultures. If they can learn the value of their native culture, pride may increase and overcome shame and doubt of being a minority. This pride in self will enable these students to take initiative and become autonomous.

Since Erikson’s stages build on the previous ones, the third and fourth stages: Initiative vs. guilt and Industry vs. Inferiority, cannot be fully fulfilled if the first two were not. The fifth stage, Identity vs. Role confusion, is important to consider when trying to reach out to children with torn identify. These students need to identify with themselves and their roles as Cambodian Americans. Part of identifying with their selves is to understand where they come from and if they feel a gap missing, then, they will not

have strong identification with self and, therefore, will be confused about their role in life.

According to Erikson, this confusion will result in having low self-esteem and social withdrawal. On the other hand, children who satisfy their role identification develop a sense of confidence and a positive identification. The *Angkor Youth Dance Program* allows boys and girls the opportunity to interact with their culture and reclaim its beauty. This beauty can serve as a renaissance of the trust that was eroded during the Khmer Rouge genocide. If trust can be re-established, it will enable the dance students to move past Erikson's second stage thus allowing them to be able to take initiative, be industrious and eventually satisfy what Erikson calls role identification.



An example of a **best practice** of the Angkor Youth Dance Program is its community emphasis, an emphasis that encompasses the core values in community psychology: individual wellness, sense of community, social justice, citizen participation, community strengths and collaborations, respect for human diversity and attention to relevant research findings (Dalton et, al. 2001). *Individual wellness* is promoted through activities that encourage personal growth. These activities include workshops on career explorations, decision-making, stress-management, and overall health promotion. Policies and interventions can have a powerful and positive effect on the health of individuals and the community (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Sense of Community is encouraged through activities that focus on strong group identification. The group is encouraged to collaborate in the planning of various activities. The Program's teachers, students and their parents are encouraged to participate in the *Angkor Youth Dance* planning board. These practices enhance communication among students and board members. The performances where parents, teachers, and community members attend instill recognition and group pride.

Programs that take a multi-issue approach and target larger structural issues like poverty, in addition to individual concerns, have been found to be more successful at impacting the well being and health of individuals (Caughy et, al. 1999). The *Angkor Youth Dance Program* addresses *Social Justice* by providing Southeast Asian youth with tools to reclaim the culture and beauty that was torn from Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge genocide.

The meaningful involvement of the dance students in the planning board mentioned above and their involvement in the decision making of performances and every day program routines serve to enhance their *Citizen Participation*. Students are encouraged to incorporate modern dance with the traditional Cambodian dance. An example of combining the old and the new is seen with a combination of the Monkey Dance and Break Dance. This combination of traditional Cambodian culture and the American culture shows that these students are **not only taking** in the dance lessons in, but they are able to bring these lessons out in other situations. Also the *Angkor Youth Dance Program* pays small stipends to their performers as a way to show value for their work. These small stipends help keep youth involved.

The momentum of the Program's success is ongoing since **new leadership** is encouraged within the Program. Teenagers who are interested have the chance to become assistants to the teachers. Programs that are led with a leadership/democratic style provide the opportunity for meaningful participation of all members in the group (Wilson, 2002). Meaningful participation is strengthened as students realize that their involvement in this Program is valued at all levels. They become empowered as they see that their decisions matter and that these decisions could influence the community for the better. Neighborhoods and the larger community impact the well-being and health of individuals (Caughy et, al. 1999).



Community strengths and collaborations can be seen through the various **partnerships** of this Program. The *Angkor Youth Dance Program* is an interdisciplinary part of the Angkor Dance Troupe. The students of the *Angkor Youth Dance Program* are usually also members of the Angkor Dance Troupe. Supporters of the program include the Massachusetts Cultural Council Youth Reach Initiative, Lowell Enterprise Community, Lowell Community Development Block Grant Program, Lowell Cultural Council, Friends of the Angkor Dance Troupe, Greater Lowell Community Foundation, Southern New England Folk & Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, Lowell National Historical Park, Big Brother Big Sister of Greater Lowell ADAM project and the University of Massachusetts Lowell (Angkor Dance Troupe, 2002).

The University of Massachusetts Lowell has played a significant role in assisting with this Program. The partnership between the Troupe and UML evolved as a

result of a conversation between a Cambodian graduate nursing student, Chhan Touch and his professor at the time, Dr. Nina Coppens. Mr. Touch was the president of the Angkor Dance Troupe Board of Directors. He invited Dr. Coppens to a Troupe Performance as well as to a board meeting. His pride and faith in this program encouraged his professor to become interested and to assist this program, both as one of its board members and as its evaluator. Dr. Coppens also promoted the involvement of other faculty and students. Paul Marion, a **staff of UMASS Lowell**, has also served on the board of directors. The Psychology Department and the Nursing Department have worked together to continue to be of service to this program.

University Roles in the Angkor Youth Dance Program have provided **undergraduate and graduate students** with the opportunity to assist in the evaluation process through research, the conduct of interviews and focus groups. These activities have enriched university students as they gain more knowledge regarding research, youth, health promotion behaviors, and Cambodian culture. Students have also had an opportunity to present educational programs to the *Angkor Youth Program* on topics such as managing stress, thinking about the future, violence and injury prevention. University students that serve in this community program become role models for the *Angkor Youth Dance* students just as the later become role models for the university students.

Brodsky and Marx (2001) teach us that there are multiple psychological senses of community for individuals in a given setting. Organizations that press for diversity foster a culture of connectedness and actively legitimize multiple realities (Bond, 1999). *Respect for Human Diversity* is the heart of this *Angkor Dance Program*. Through their beautiful dance routine, the dance students of this

Program participants are taught to take pride in their culture even if it diverges from the mainstream in United States. Cultural sensitivity in this Program is seen through surface structure and deep structure of the Cambodian Community. **Surface structure** involves the observable aspects of a Program such as language used to communicate, music, food and the setting, while deep structure involves core values, cultural beliefs, values and practices (Dalton et, al. 2001). Observable aspects that address surface structure are music and clothing of the Cambodian tradition. Also, the teachers communicate with the students in both English and Khmer.

Community Repositories go hand in hand with the Program's cultural sensitivity aspect. The formal evaluative data of this Program have been presented to audiences in the University and other locales. However, the knowledge is not only spread to those that have the means to attend higher education institutes or those that are proficient in the English language; there are materials that are translated into Khmer and are distributed throughout local organizations. Examples include brochures on important information regarding the Angkor Youth Dance Program, its supporters, pictures and drawings rich in culture and more.



The core values of Cambodian Culture are represented through the dance. The dances tell stories of the traditions and values of the Cambodian way of life. For instance, there is a timeless fish dance where the students act as if they are catching fish in the same manner that their ancestors did for survival. Another way in which the dance troupe works to preserve tradition is by bringing over Masters of dance and arts from Cambodia to teach the dance students. Programs that promote human diversity can target the needs of diverse individuals and thus foster positive outcomes for individuals and the group (Brodsky & Marx, 2001).

Annual evaluation of this Program reflects a *focus on research* and how it can help us develop strong programs. Evaluation of the Angkor Dance Program involves interviews and focus group discussions with dance students; surveys of adult dance teachers and teenage assistants; reflections of university students; feedback from audiences at Angkor Youth Dance performances, and assessment of enrollment patterns (Coppens, 2001). Reasons shared for why students join



the Dance Program and continue to participate include: having fun, learning to dance, learning more about culture, having pride in self, getting away from bad influences, meeting new people, making friends, having more self

disciplines, learning to keep self healthy, having a way to deal with stress, and so others will be proud of me. The teachers and staff identify the benefits for youth

participants as including: experiencing a part of the Cambodian culture through the dance, being in a safe environment, making friends, increasing communication skills, and gaining knowledge on topics like substance abuse and violence prevention. The staff have also identified various barriers to youth involvement, including youth not having time; youth lacking transportation and having responsibilities at home. The Angkor Youth Dance Program Advisory Committee incorporates the recommendations of the research conducted and thus **research** informs **practice**.

The Program has **sustained** itself through its' multi-level approach that is reflected through its supporters that vary from cultural centers, community organizations, businesses and more. The Spring 2001 evaluation showed that 94% of the students that enrolled in this Program completed it. These **indicators** do not go as unsung numbers; these numbers are reflected through countless types of community involvement with this group and through the recognition received citywide and nationally. After completion of every 8-10 week session, the dance students hold a public professional dance performance. They have performed at many locales in the Lowell community including elementary schools and community centers. This Program has also participated and performed in programs such as the UMass Lowell Summer Music Series and the community celebration of Cambodian New Year at the Tsongas Arena. The Program's performance within the community brings forth program awareness and a sense of pride for those who once lost hope due to the hardships of war.

The Angkor Youth Dance Program has been recognized locally receiving awards for excellence in promoting diversity within the community. This Program has also been recognized nationally with the *Coming Up Taller* Award from the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. The students spoke and performed during the award ceremony at the White House and thus raised the group's prestige at the macro level.

Ecological levels of analysis for community psychology examine the interdependent relationships of individuals and societies (Dalton et, al. 2001). These ecological levels of analysis include: individuals, microsystems, organizations, localities and macrosystems. Youths' sense of community within different ecological levels have been found to influence their psychological well-being (Chipuer, 2000). From personal experience, as an assistant to the Angkor Youth Dance Program evaluator, Dr. Nina Coppins, I have seen various instances where boys and girls first walk into the program expressing frustration with school, family and self. Two to three months into the program, after learning about the value of their origin, they showed great improvements in self-esteem, academic achievement, stress management and overall psychological well-being. This *individual* growth has been documented in pre and post questionnaires. Simultaneously, this newly established pride for their primary culture enables youth to bond with other family members within their *microsystems*. Moreover, the dance students and the leaders, initiated by their common goal and support for each other, cultivate a personal relationship that helps to strengthen the Angkor Youth Dance Program as an *Organization*. A reciprocal feeling of loyalty comes about from the teachers and the students. The Angkor Youth Dance Program is not a drop in



center; commitment and discipline is what enables the dance students to perform.

Through the Angkor Youth Dance Program the students also learn to appreciate their *locality*. The Lowell community's support and willingness to embrace this Program and other programs that promote the well being of the Southeast Asians have provided this group with a home away from home. The promotion of the Angkor Youth Dance Program within the larger society or *macrosystem* can be seen through the national recognition they have received. Furthermore, through their unique dance, they may develop a feeling of solidarity among Cambodian culture throughout society.

The efforts of the Angkor Youth Dance Program instill hope in Cambodians/Cambodian Americans, Southeast Asians and other groups. Hope is like the guide that consoles us during a dark storm. It is like a map that reassures us that we will get to our desired destination. A lack of hope defeats purpose in life and can lead us to depression and other unhealthy psychological states. All of our motivations in life are inspired by hope. If we are hopeful of ourselves then, we should fight for social justice so that hope can spread. A way of fighting for justice is by supporting programs such as Angkor Youth Dance Program and other programs that support groups that have been marginalized and/or discriminated. The only way we can help fight macro problems like discrimination and poverty is by educating ourselves and others. Freeing someone from ignorance provides the same feeling one gets when one sees a newborn child: hope.

Overall, the Angkor Youth Dance is a program where the Cambodian youth take part in preserving and promoting their culture. In this Program, the youth learn and perform traditional



Cambodian dances that tell stories about the beauty of their culture. Bringing back the beauty that was supplanted by war is a tool to fight back the shadows of war. Sharing the beauty of Cambodia with others has empowered the Angkor Youth Dance Program with national recognition and support from society, which has also become empowered by this group's effort.

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Note

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