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Healing through Hip Hop in the Slums of Phnom Penh Cambodia

Romi Grossberg

Independent Researcher and Performance Activist , Australia

Abstract

Local non-government organisation 'Tiny Toones' is the first and only of its kind in Cambodia, to use hip hop to engage with, and empower the most disadvantaged children and youth in Phnom Penh. Working with young people from backgrounds of drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution, gang life, family violence and extreme poverty, it offers creative arts alongside education and life skills. Teaching life lessons through break-dance, hip hop dance, lyric writing, rapping, and art, Tiny Toones 'speaks street' to those that need it most, empowering them to believe in themselves, trust themselves and make better choices about their futures. The staff and students of Tiny Toones are living proof of how the creative arts can be used to change lives and free young people from their past.

[**Keywords:** Hip Hop, Therapy, Performance, Cambodia, Tiny Toones]

The creative arts have long been used in therapy. Gone are the days when dance, music or art therapy were considered 'too alternative' and 'not real therapy.' I remember when my mother was studying to be a Dance therapist in the 1980's and 90's and everyone, myself included, boiled it down to her just 'being a hippy.' She spent many years trying to explain what it was and why it worked, falling on deaf ears. Only when I started studying social work in Melbourne, Australia did it start to make sense and now in 2013, I realise that I have fundamentally been working for the last three years, although unintentionally, in dance therapy, music therapy and art therapy. Always a believer and advocate for the relationship between physical health, mental health and emotional health, always viewing health from a holistic point of view, I found myself living in Cambodia managing a drop-in Centre for 'street kids' which used creative arts as a tool for engagement and empowerment. Here my belief was cemented as I watched, daily, how the dance floor and the music allowed children and young people to break free from societies imposed values. It helped them to break free from political, family, and personal trauma and to break free from themselves. I have witnessed teenage drug users leap out on to the dance floor with full force and dance through the pain and anguish of 'needing a hit', sweating out their 'detox' and melting it into the sweat of relief and exhaustion. Also victims of domestic violence, frantically writing new lyrics about pains and frustrations, and then singing it to a group of others who understood it. In a society like Cambodia, where talking about fears and dreams, where 'complaining' is not acceptable, the creative arts is offering a new way to heal from their past and grow.

Whilst this is not a new phenomenon, it is certainly new to Cambodia. The use of hip hop, once considered 'anti-Khmer, and 'creating gangsters', is now the platform used to engage with disadvantaged children and youth in a continually growing centre in Phnom Penh. Hip hop 'speaks street' in a non-judgmental way that engages young people, empowering them and allowing them to be themselves and discover who they are. What I didn't realise at the time was how widespread the use of hip hop had become until I was invited to San Patrignano, a drug rehabilitation community in Italy, to participate in 'WeFree' Day ('we are free of drugs') where seven countries came together to discuss the use of break-dancing and rapping to empower young people to make the choice against drugs. In Australia, I presented at the 6th International Conference on Drugs and Young People at the 'Using Creative Tools to Empower Youth and Prevent Drug Use' conference and later in Singapore on how hip hop dance and music was impacting on the lives of disadvantaged youth in Cambodia. Further recognition was being invited to present at the first ever Tedx held in Cambodia, where in 2011 I presented 'Dance Your Life Around', bringing eleven former 'street kids' on the stage to dance and sing their true-life stories of personal struggles and survival, to a standing ovation at this prestigious event (Tedx Phnom Penh, 2011).ⁱ



Figure 1: Founder KK

It is a positive sign that the use of the creative arts in working with disadvantaged youth is starting to grow in Cambodia but the first and only organisation to use hip hop as this platform is local Non-Government Organisation (NGO) 'Tiny Toones' based in the slums, only minutes from the centre of Phnom Penh. Tiny Toones works with the most disadvantaged children and youth in Cambodia, aged 4-25 years who come from backgrounds of drug addiction, alcoholism, family violence, gang life, HIV, labour and/or sexual exploitation and extreme poverty. With Phnom Penh being saturated with NGO's, Tiny Toones is unique in its approach. Taking a holistic approach to mental, physical and emotional health, Tiny Toones uses the universal language of the creative arts, more specifically hip hop, to empower youth to lead healthy lives and dream of better futures for themselves.



Figure 2: Group Shot

Overview of Cambodian history

With Cambodia's tumultuous recent history, the country could be considered a 'new' country only recently being re-born and developed. Bordering Laos, Vietnam and Thailand with a total landmass of 181,035 square kilometers, Cambodia is located in the southern portion of the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia. It has an estimated population of 15,000,000. Cambodia's economy has taken many hits over recent decades, from complete devastation in the 1970's, diplomatic isolation in the early 1980's and the Asian economic crisis. In 2008 Cambodia's economy was affected by high oil and food prices as well as the global financial crisis, which saw a decrease in orders in the garment industry and a drop in tourism (Ministry of Planning, 2010).ⁱⁱ Its current economic challenge heading in to the future is to create an environment which enables the private sector to establish

enough jobs to handle Cambodia's demographic imbalance, with half of the population being under 21 years (ASE-AN, 2009).ⁱⁱⁱ Today, Cambodia still remains heavily reliant on foreign assistance with about half of the central government budget depending on donor assistance. With more than a third of Cambodian's still living below the national poverty line, on 2,473 Riel (61 cents) a day (UNDP, 2010),^{iv} families are heavily exposed to extreme poverty and food insecurity. Children are exposed to malnourishment from a young age, which impacts on education and learning ability.

The Cambodian civil war in the early 1970's left the country's transport system, harvest and water supply in a great state of decline. By April 1975, the newly proclaimed Democratic Kampuchea, commonly referred to as the Khmer Rouge, were in power until 1979, during which an estimated 1.7 million people died through torture, execution, starvation and exhaustion. (BBC, 2013).^v Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot wanted to start Cambodia all over and declared 'Year Zero', erasing all history. In order to gain complete control he ordered the torture and killing of all teachers, artists, professionals, intellectuals, police, government employees and ethnic minority groups and abolished all money and private property. The city of Phnom Penh was emptied, violently forcing all civilians to the countryside to cultivate fields, where the majority of Cambodians still live.



Figure 3: Learning new moves

Cambodia's young population is faced with various issues that place them in a highly vulnerable position. One major problem is the economic migration from rural to urban settings where young people arrive in cities with little or no money, support and family. With limited education, knowledge of or access to social services, there is a high risk of alcoholism, drug use, prostitution, unsafe sex, exposure to HIV, theft and poverty. Social services are limited and there is limited knowledge and understanding in the sector. With 'saving face' being a dominant feature of Cambodian life, young people are not inclined to seek services for medical or social needs. Unfortunately a great number of children become 'street kids'. There are an estimated 24,000 children living and working on the streets of Cambodia.^{vi} This particularly vulnerable group become greatly at risk of domestic and street violence, trafficking, sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and drug and alcohol abuse.



Figure 4: Performing in Singapore

Cambodia, like many other Asian countries is what I would term a 'non-verbal' society, whether it is due to saving face, war and conflict survival, or poverty survival, I am not sure, or maybe it is due to the lack of social services. Whatever the reason, there is little or no counseling services in Cambodia, and certainly no knowledge of what does exist among the vulnerable groups. It is a society that believes family problems should remain private affairs even if they involve family violence, and where talking about your problems is considered a weakness and undesirable. Phnom Penh only recently introduced its first ever Social Work degree at a university level with the first graduating class in 2011. Although there was international assistance in the development of this course, it is still, by western standards, well below par. The overwhelming rote learning education system at a primary, secondary and university level does not allow for

critical thinking, pro-activeness or concept understanding and analysis. Furthermore the education system heavily relies on corruption and bribe money with students having to pay individual teachers for class handouts, homework, assignments, exams and grades to pass. This neither encourages teachers to teach, nor students to learn. This also excludes poor students from having the opportunity to attend.



Figure 5: Tedx

I am certain I am not alone in believing that education is the key to the road out of poverty and helps to create a better society in which the Government works on behalf of its people. In a country such as Cambodia, with such a young and extremely impoverished population, education for all seems like an unattainable dream. To make this possible, children and young people need to be empowered to believe there is the potential for change. If education is the key, then empowerment can be the eyes and hands that find this key. This is where NGO's such as Tiny Toones play such a large role. They have found a revolutionary way to connect and engage with young people in Cambodia. The universal language of hip hop has found its way onto the streets of Phnom Penh and its surrounds, and those on the streets have found their way to this 'now quite famous' NGO Tiny Toones. Tiny Toones 'speaks street' in a way that those that attend can understand. There is break-dancing, hip hop dance, Deejaing, lyric writing, learning to MC, music production and art, all under the umbrella of hip hop, mostly in the Khmer language with some English for those that are willing and able. Hip hop is the draw card to this centre that, without any advertising but rather through word of mouth and only nine years since its inception, has over 300 students a month, lining up willing to learn. What is unique about this centre is

that the majority of its staff are former ‘street kids’ themselves, the original students under the founder Tuy Sobil, aka: KK, who were mentored in to leadership roles and eventually the staff in the dance and music departments. Mentoring ‘street kids’ to become reliable staff members of an N.G.O. is no easy feat. Whilst their leap from student to volunteer, to staff member, is predominantly based on their dance and music abilities, they then have to learn the responsibilities of everything from positive role modeling, to punctuality, scheduling, time sheets, time management and financial management as they are working and earning for the first time in their lives.

Whilst hip hop is the draw card, once in, each student is exposed to education classes and to an outreach program. Students can learn Khmer, English, Math and computer studies, as well as receive knowledge in health, hygiene, drug and sex education. These ‘additional’ studies would not be possible however without the initial engagement through hip hop.

Case Study No. 1: Samnang, 17 years-old.

Samnang grew up in a gang in the town of Battambang, a six-hour drive from the capital of Phnom Penh. He lived a ‘street’ life, doing drugs, and leaving school before his teen years. One day he saw the Tiny Toones break-dancers perform on a ‘tour’ in Battambang and heard their story of getting off the streets and learning to dance, drug-free and judgment free. He hitchhiked his way to Phnom Penh to find them and was accepted in to the centre with no questions asked.

Samnang was an incredibly shy boy who barely spoke. He stood on the outskirts of the dance floor watching, without the courage to join in. The older boys and the staff encouraged him and mentored him, taking him in as one of their own.

Samnang was discovering for the first time a sense of family. He was not only starting to learn to break-dance, but he was learning trust, respect and friendship. He was learning how to be a team player and learning to accept leadership and teaching from others who were not out to hurt him, but there to support him. These were all new feelings for Samnang and it took him a long time to open up and accept his new life as something he deserved and was entitled to.

Gradually Samnang moved from hovering around the back of the dance floor, to joining the main circle of dancers, eventually having his moment in the centre, dancing to the applause and encouragement of his new family. The centre started giving him more responsibility and he became a volunteer helping with errands and supporting the younger children, which he did with great pride. Samnang joined the outreach classes and learnt more about drug use and addiction, about safe sex and about basic hygiene practices and over time he was teaching young six year olds to wash their hands before eating.

The confidence Samnang gained on the dance floor allowed him to open up to the prospect of learning and believing in himself. By 2010 he joined the Khmer classes and in 2011 the English classes too. He was well behind a boy for his age, learning Khmer at a grade 3 level and struggling with the concept of English. To his credit, he never gave up, even asking for additional classes to help him.

By the end of 2011 Tiny Toones decided to start a 'B' team of dancers to shadow the 'A' team of break-dancing staff who routinely performed to large audiences. Samnang was thrilled to be chosen in this team where he and a group of eight dancers, male and female, rehearsed consistently and with pride. Again, a new family was born for Samnang and he became the glue holding this tight-knit group together. He also learnt for the first time to work along side females and see them as his equal. Soon after the development of this team, Samnang made his greatest leap. He asked the management staff to help him re-enroll at school. Samnang wanted to graduate. Never have you seen a school uniform being worn with such delight, that even once he returned to the centre, he strutted around and danced in it for the rest of the day. In 2013, seventeen year-old Samnang is now in grade 10.

Hip hop alone may be what allowed Samnang to express himself, what brought him to traverse across the country to Phnom Penh, but what he learnt on the dance floor, the sense of friendship and family, the re-learning of respect, team work and the belief in himself is what gave him the courage to ask to go to school. Tiny Toones multi-disciplinary approach, their holistic view of health, and their non-judgmental acceptance of new students gave Samnang the freedom to choose a better life for himself.

Each student that enters the centre is encouraged and not forced, to enter the education program. Many, afraid of being considered 'stupid', come initially only to dance or learn music. With time and the growth in confidence, almost all enroll in at least computer studies and Khmer, and eventually English when they realise that even in Cambodia, the knowledge of English allows for a better paid job.

For the younger children, aged 4-10 years old, education is their priority. These children come in to learn Khmer and English and are then exposed to the creative arts. Many come from backgrounds of extreme poverty, single parent households, or other forms of guardianship. They do not know how to enter the school system and even those that do, cannot afford the fees and bribe money. Families also seem more comfortable and confident to approach this centre than a government run school. These children come to Tiny Toones where they are split into classes which match the school system allowing the greatest opportunity for supported reintegration. Outside of these classes, they have compulsory education in health and basic hygiene, learning how and why to wash their hands and brush their teeth. They also spend one hour in the art room or on the dance floor a day with the staff. In art they can free-draw or follow instruction, and always have their

artwork pinned up on the walls. The children even painted the art classroom walls themselves. The laughter, clapping and cheering that come out of the dance room would rival any large rock concert. This place provides the opportunity for the children to be in a safe environment away from predators of exploitation, dangers of needles and sharp objects on their bare feet and family violence. Children having the space to 'just be' is as important as any form of therapy; they are allowed to giggle, be happy, play, dance, sing and relate to other children in a non-harmful and non-aggressive way. They are exposed to learning life and social skills that may not be taught at home, learning friendships, and learning to listen and be heard. They form life long friendships, as can be seen by two older boys, now 18 year-old Ouk and 20 year-old Vy who came in as Tiny Toones first students and are both now dance teachers and third year university students.

Case Study No. 2: Vy, 20 years old

Vy grew up outside Phnom Penh, near the border of Vietnam. He was never violent or a drug user. He was from a low-income family and was going to school as a young boy. One day a fire ripped through his family home, taking with it all of their belongings including their small life savings that was, like most Cambodian families, kept under the mat in their home. They quickly went from being poor, to having nothing at all. The family couldn't afford to send Vy to school anymore and he left to start picking up scraps and goods to recycle off the street for a few Riel to help the family eat. Moving to the streets of Phnom Penh, Vy found himself in a street gang. When his gang made the move from petty theft to violent theft against people, he left. Vy says that whilst he needed the money he did not want to be a part of hurting other people.

As Vy entered his teen years, he came across KK, founder of Tiny Toones and started break-dancing with him and a small group of boys in KK's living room. Vy had raw talent and as Tiny Toones grew, so did Vy, as a dancer and in confidence. He was a natural leader and KK began to rely on him for support, a role that Vy took to easily and with great pride. Within only a few years, Vy was working as a dance teacher, teaching the young children and the young teenagers and playing a supporting role in teaching about hygiene in the community. He had also received support through another NGO to re-enrol at school.

Vy was eventually given the responsibility of being the team leader of all the dance teachers whilst attending classes in English and computer studies. His English improved every day. In 2010 Vy graduated from high school with ambitions to go on to university. His ability to dance, his teaching and leadership at Tiny Toones, his increased responsibility and the belief instilled in him, helped Vy to dream of doing bigger things with his life. He dreamt of graduating from Business Management at University so that he could work in management at Tiny Toones and help it grow, wanting others to receive the same support and education he received. In 2011 Vy, with the support of Tiny Toones enrolled in the four-year

course and is the first Tiny Toones staff or student to have ever entered university, setting a new precedent for all. He is the first known 'street kid' in Cambodia to graduate from high school. He is certainly the first in his family to achieve any of this. He is also challenging the strong hierarchical class system of Cambodia that works hard at keeping people 'in their place'. With a university degree, he can move up in class and is truly challenging the system. He will have access to higher paid jobs and be 'allowed' to marry above his original class. Vy will graduate from university in 2014. He was also promoted in 2012 to the Creative Program Coordinator.

There are countless stories coming out of this one centre. It is not about the centre however but rather about the impact that the creative arts has on young disadvantaged children and youth and how the creative arts can be used as a tool to free them of their past. I often say to the staff and students - "you are not your past ... you are what you choose to be" and hope that we have then given them all the tools they need to make good choices. So what tools do they need? This depends on their background and what they have learnt from their family homes if they have one, what they have learnt on the street, or at school if they were fortunate enough to have been. We teach them life skills through the outreach program, the languages of Khmer and English and more through the education program, but most importantly we offer them the creative arts. The creative arts is the catalyst that helps them to grow as individuals. They learn dance, music, and art and just as importantly they learn the social and life skills that accompany this that cannot be taught in a classroom. We hope these skills coupled with the empowerment through dance and music, gives them the tools and the confidence to make these smarter choices, and more important, to *want* to make smarter choices.

Case Study No.3: Bou, 20 years-old.

Bou is the middle child of eight and went to school when he was young until his family couldn't afford it anymore. Like many, he moved out to the streets to pick recycled goods off the ground and dump sites to help make money for his family. Soon he turned to drugs and gang life and became quite violent and a heavy drug user, too embarrassed to return to his family. He slept between the streets and a drug refuge. As he entered his teen years, Tiny Toones started sending break-dance teachers to this drug refuge and he began to learn from them. Bou was a 'natural' who enjoyed break-dancing and started taking his aggression out on the dance floor rather than the streets. He then started attending the main centre to learn from 'The Master' of break-dance, the founder, KK. For a while he was doing both, break-dancing and drugs. KK spent many hours mentoring Bou in both his dance and in his lifestyle choices. As his dance and confidence improved, his desire for drugs decreased. He had chosen a dancers lifestyle and to take the classes on offer to him at the Centre. He quit smoking cigarettes also claiming that it was

harder to dance because he had less energy. He wanted to be the best dancer he could be. By 2007 he was already considered one of the best break-dancers in Cambodia, famous for his athleticism, strength, flexibility and head-spins.

In 2011 Bou entered a break-dance competition with three of his friends that was broadcast across local television. They won each round as well as the grand final. His parents saw him on television, clean from drugs, motivated and dancing, prompting them to call him for the first time in many years, and they have since rekindled their relationship.

Bou is now working as a break-dance teacher at the centre and has a full class of young students five days a week. He is also contracted with his 'dance team' to perform for various high-class events around Phnom Penh. Additionally Bou has travelled to Mexico and Thailand to participate in workshops on the use of dance to empower youth to make decisions against drug taking behaviour. He is clean from drugs and before his 18th birthday, enrolled in English classes. Having never learnt English before, it was difficult for him but he was dedicated and soon became the top of his beginner's class.

2011 saw Bou along with ten other dance and music staff and students, perform at various venues in Melbourne Australia and later in Auckland New Zealand. First they needed to choreograph the longest performance ever attempted by this young group; a 90-minute piece based on their true life stories. This was the first time they had been assigned to do a piece of choreography that was so reflective and serious and for such a great length of time. It took great courage, introspection and teamwork. Bou was given an additional task. To add to the pressure of choreography, rehearsal, and the fear of performing to a foreign audience, he was asked to be the guest speaker on stage. His initial response was of fear and self-doubt and that his English wasn't good enough. Without being pressured to say yes, he was seen practicing his English with any and all foreigners he could find, asking "Can I tell you my life story?" He would practice the telling of his life story in English any minute that he wasn't rehearsing his dancing and acting. Both in Australia and in New Zealand, he was up on the stage with a full house, or standing comfortably in front of a local group of teenage drug users at a community centre, telling his life story and telling the audience that anything is possible, that if he could do it, so could they. He explained his former drug addiction, gang life and family breakdown before explaining how he found dance and this new family to support him through this. He was a true inspiration to every person he met. His confidence grew each time he performed and each time he spoke.

Bou says of Tiny Toones, "this is my family, now I have two family". He admits that he is not sure where he would be if he hadn't found dance, 'maybe dead? maybe in jail'. The once mischievous young boy who previously had to be dragged to class, is now a young man encouraging others to attend class and lends

an ear to those in need. He is not *just* a break-dance teacher and performer, he is a mentor in every sense of the word, to drug users and all disadvantaged youth.

There are over ten young staff members in the creative arts department, all of them with similar stories. All of them were fortunate to have found dance, music or art during the most vulnerable times of their lives, all of them who admit they may well not have survived without it. They are the lucky ones. Lucky also are the local children and young disadvantaged youth of Phnom Penh who receive daily classes in the creative arts, mentorship and education. They too now have the opportunity to grow and learn and to receive guidance from a young group of people who understand them. They are exposed to the life lessons learnt on the dance floor, to express themselves through dance and music and to learn the values of friendship, teamwork, respect and honour. They have become empowered and have learnt to have faith in themselves, in their decision-making abilities, and to learn right from wrong, good from bad and to *choose* a better life for themselves. This is what the creative arts offers, in this case particularly hip hop dance, and this is the impact it has, in freeing these disadvantaged youth from their past and helping them to look forward to a brighter future.

Notes

ⁱ Tedx Phnom Penh Cambodia, 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Hvkh9R6RU>

ⁱⁱ Ministry of Planning, Royal Government of Cambodia, 2010; 'Achieving Cambodia's Millennium Development Goals (CMDGs), Update 2010. <http://mop.gov.kh>

ⁱⁱⁱ ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement, 2009. <http://www.asean.fta.govt.nz>

^{iv} United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Cambodia, 2010. <http://www.un.org.kh>

^v BBC News Asia-Pacific, 2013. www.bbc.co.uk

^{vi} Child Safe International (Non-Government Organisation), 2007. www.childsafe-international.org

• *The names in the case studies have been changed and are not their real names.*

Romi Grossberg, Australian-born, has spent many years volunteering and working in the areas of community development and international development in South East Asia, including India, Vietnam and most recently Cambodia. Her academic studies from Melbourne Australia, include a Bachelor of Social Studies, a Bachelor of Social Work, and she began her Master of (International) Public Health before moving to Phnom Penh in March 2010. There she was the General Manager and Management Advisor of local non-government organisation 'Tiny Toones', using hip hop as a tool for empowering the most disadvantaged youth of Phnom Penh. She has since presented at numerous conferences on the use of the creative arts with disadvantaged youth in various countries including Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and most notably at Tedx Phnom Penh.
