



Following Doug Mendel to Cambodia

BY NICOLE FORMOSA

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We at the Summit Daily News have reported extensively on longtime local Doug Mendel's many missions to Cambodia over the last few years. Stories about his fundraisers, his progress, this year's delivery of a firetruck donated by Breckenridge's Red, White and Blue Fire Protection District to the Sihanoukville Fire Station in Southern Cambodia and most recently, Mendel's decision to move to Moab and continue running his Cambodian relief fund from there.

Doug Mendel poses with his precious cargo in Phnom Penh International Airport in Cambodia.

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This time, though, I decided to see Mendel's work for myself.

In November, I accompanied Mendel to Cambodia for a week and saw firsthand how his efforts in Summit County are affecting one of the poorest countries in the world.

BANGKOK - Doug Mendel looked like a proud parent as he watched his 12 large cardboard boxes crawl on a conveyor belt into the belly of a Thai Airways airplane bound for Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from inside the international terminal at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport.

"These boxes are like my babies," he said as he scurried to the window to take a photo of his boxes with the same gusto as a parent watching their kids get on the schoolbus for the first day of school would.

The numbered boxes, most of which Mendel packed eight months before his November trip to Asia, were filled with fire gear, donated by Summit County fire departments, for firefighters in Cambodia, stuffed animals, toothbrushes and toothpaste for street kids and gadgets for an underfunded national park. More than 30 hours had ticked away since we left Denver at that point, and Mendel was pleased to see that his cargo had made it this far.

Over the last five years, Mendel's life has come to revolve around the contents of boxes like these and what they represent: The hours of work he's poured into helping the people of Cambodia through his nonprofit organization, the Douglas Mendel Cambodian Relief Fund.

Twice a year, Mendel travels to his home away from home in the small, impoverished Kingdom of Cambodia and delivers thousands of dollars worth of donated and purchased items. While there, he buys inexpensive handmade Cambodia textiles in bulk at the bustling markets and sells them stateside for a profit, then dumps the money back into his organization.

In the two-and-a-half years since he gained nonprofit status, Mendel has raised \$63,000 through sales of Cambodian crafts, cash donations and fundraisers. He estimates 90 to 95 percent of that has gone back to



A child at M'Lop Tapang plays with the stuffed animals donated by Doug Mendel.

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Cambodians.

Mendel and I arrived at the 5-year-old Phnom Penh International Airport just after 9 a.m., exhausted from the 40-hour, four-plane-change journey, but excited about the adventure ahead. Also, at least for me, the sunny and warm (about 85- 90 degrees Fahrenheit) tropical weather was a welcome change from the snow and chilly temperatures back in Summit County.

After clearing the prized boxes through customs with only a slight hassle - it seems the official wanted Mendel to have a letter from the Department of Interior verifying his purpose in Cambodia - we were promptly greeted by Mendel's friend and translator, Mr. Kanal. Kanal, a local teacher who's lived his entire life in Cambodia, had arranged for a taxi van to shuttle us the four hours to the coastal port city of Sihanoukville, where we spent the next three days.

Run-down villages interspersed with vivid green rice fields set against the Damrei Mountains in the distance marked the landscape as we ventured farther out of the capital city and closer to Sihanoukville.

Sihanoukville sits on the Gulf of Thailand in Southern Cambodia and is known among tourists for its string of clean, white sand beaches and relaxing atmosphere. Mendel discovered the city of about 156,000 residents in 1997 when he was traveling through the region. When he began his relief efforts six years later, he started in Sihanoukville.

Once we arrived, our first stop was dinner with Captain Sok of the Sihanoukville Fire Department. Sok is well-respected in the community - this is apparent later in the week when the bus depot gives him a free bus ticket for a planned trip because of his stature - and runs a motorcycle repair shop out of his home, as well as heading up the local fire department. He speaks only a few words of English, and our brief conversations were facilitated through Kanal.

Soon after we began eating at a friend's open-air restaurant, Sok excitedly pulled out a video camera, which Mendel donated to the department on a different trip, and showed us footage of the donated Red, White and Blue firetruck's first call to service in June - a small fire in a nearby fishing village.

The gesture was a gratifying moment for Mendel, who worked for two years to find and ship a fire truck overseas to Cambodia.

"It brought a smile to my face knowing that not only do they appreciate the fire truck and are using for what it is meant to be used for - fighting fires -, but that the captain took digital pictures with digital camcorder that I gave him for proof," Mendel said.

Though Mendel is best known around Summit County for his philanthropic efforts benefiting fire departments, he's also built a reputation for himself in Sihanoukville for helping the local Khmer people through two organizations: M'Lop Tapang and The Starfish Project.

On day 2 in Sihanoukville, we visited M'Lop Tapang, an unassuming house that sits behind a rusting white gate on a quiet side street.

M'Lop Tapang strives to keep local kids off the streets, where they make money selling crafts or begging, and in school. The nonprofit works with 600 children by offering counseling, family reintegration, health programs and formal and informal education.

Mendel began making regular trips to M'Lop Tapang in September, 2004. Since then, he's given them cameras, two-way radios, latex gloves, toothbrushes and toothpaste donated by Summit County dentists and other items for the kids.

"I just realized as easy as it was to bring stuff over for the fire stations, it was easy to bring over clothing for M'Lop Tapang," Mendel said.

While M'Lop Tapang receives other donations from time to time, other donors aren't as consistent as Mendel, project coordinator Maggie Eno said.

"No one's as good as Doug at all," said Eno, an Ireland native who started M'Lop Tapang three years ago.

Next, we hired motorbike drivers - a common mode of transportation in Cambodia - to take us across town to The Starfish Project, another nonprofit that acts as a catch-all by assisting Cambodians who fall outside the scope of any existing aid organization.

For instance, they've helped homeless mothers, malnourished babies and teenagers in need of medical assistance get back on their feet, and recently built a shelter for disabled elderly Khmers in Sihanoukville.

Five years ago, Starfish began teaching disabled natives how to bake bread and run a western style café. The bakery now fully supports itself, and has garnered international attention.

On this day, we visited Starfish so that Mendel could drop off several bottles of pre-natal vitamins from the U.S. Authentic vitamins are difficult to obtain in Cambodia, but benefit the sick immensely.

"They just get well so quickly if they have vitamins so it's good," says Starfish project coordinator Erika Hilmersson.

Another aspect of Mendel's work in Cambodia takes place at Bokor National Park located in a rural area about two hours away from Sihanoukville. The park is home to some of the world's most elusive animals, including tigers, leopard cats, Asiatic black bears, Malaysian porcupines and various species of snakes. Head ranger Chey Yuthearith runs a group of 55 rangers who patrol the remote, dense, 1,500-square -kilometer park.

Mendel first visited in 2004 and says he has made the greatest strides in his giving in the shortest period of time there because Yuthearith speaks decent English. He started by donated a few fire extinguishers and plastic goggles.

"It's just grown tremendously," Mendel said on the bumpy, dirt road to the park's headquarters.

This time around, we unloaded boxes filled with compasses, GPS units, digital cameras and \$5,200 worth of fire resistance clothing donated by Lion Apparel.

Yuthearith repaid us by arranging for a free overnight stay in a modern guesthouse at the Bokor Hill Station, a sprawling plateau dotted with dilapidated French colonial buildings overlooking the expansive park.

Back in the 1920s, the site served as a resort for French settlers. Now, the 32 kilometer road to the top is in such disrepair that it takes three hours of careful driving to reach the top.

During the seven days I spent with Mendel, his unfaltering passion and affinity for Cambodia resonated time and time again.

As we traveled from town to town, Mendel told anyone who asked - taxi drivers, merchants, tour guides, etc. -

his feelings about their land.

"This is my 11th trip to Cambodia, I love your country," he would say. He often says that it's the people, the weather, the handicrafts, the food, the history and the culture that captivated him on his first visit almost a decade ago.

For this reason, Mendel doesn't plan on curtailing his efforts in Cambodia anytime soon. In fact, he looks forward to the day that he can quit his day job and concentrate solely on his nonprofit.

In 2007, he hopes to raise \$20,000 so he can have water tenders built for two remote fire stations. In the next few years, he plans to use his nonprofit to pay for a new fire station to be built from the ground up in one of Cambodia's 29 provinces.

A fundraiser for the Douglas Mendel Cambodian Relief Fund will be held at 5 p.m. on Feb. 23 at Foodhedz Café in Frisco. To contact Mendel, visit www.dougmendel.com or email him at wndrlst49@hotmail.com

Nicole Formosa can be reached at (970) 668-4629, or at nformosa@summitdaily.com.

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