

A refuge for the traumatised

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The new Ragamuffin Art Therapy Centre hopes to play a vital role in meeting the worrying shortfall in mental health services available to Cambodians

As you walk through the high gates of its property - tucked away in a side street of Phnom Penh - you are immediately confronted by a grand white spacious house surrounded by ferns, palm trees and pebble paths.

Inside, the polished floorboards are decorated with brightly coloured bean bags, the walls adorned with vivid and cheerful paintings, and large round windows let white light stream through the open rooms.

This is the Ragamuffin Art Therapy Centre, which opens officially on Saturday. Directors Carrie Herbert and Kit Loring hope it will boost Phnom Penh's severely depleted mental health resources.

"The Ragamuffin centre will enable Cambodians to effectively respond to emotional and psychological trauma through the process of creative arts therapy," Herbert said.

The opening of the centre comes as statistics released this month by the Trans-social Psycho-social Organisation (TPO) show that 81 percent of Cambodia's population has experienced violence, 40 percent has anxiety disorders and 29



Photo by: SOVANN PHILONG

Carrie Herbert, joint director of the Ragamuffin Art Therapy Centre, hopes the new facility will fill a wide gap in the availability of mental health services in Cambodia.

percent suffers from severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"There are only 26 practicing psychiatrists in Cambodia - many of which work in Phnom Penh," said Dr Ang Sody with TPO. "This is very serious. There are many provinces where the people have no access to psychiatric help."

"One of the main purposes of this Ragamuffin centre is to train prospective art therapists to go out and work with both children and adults in prisons, with children who have been trafficked or working within NGOs," Herbert said.

The Ragamuffin Centre will provide outlets for clients to perform in drama, storytelling, poetry, music and the visual arts, which all serve to provide insight and enable clients to address their fears, tell their stories, express deep emotions and experience change in their lives, Herbert said.

Kit Loring, joint director in the Ragamuffin project, said the new art therapy centre will allow people to express their deepest fears and anxieties in a comfortable environment with trained specialists.

"We want to work with those who have been traumatised through the arts and their [often untapped] creativity," he said. "It's very important, then, that we have specialised staff in our program. You can't play with a person's trauma."

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Phnom Penh will be the third location for the Ragamuffin Art Therapy Centre, originally from South Wales, in the United Kingdom. The nongovernmental organisation was established in 1999 - the only group in Wales that specifically provided creative arts therapy for children and adults suffering from emotional distress and psychological damage. In ten years, the organisation has expanded to Russia and now to Cambodia.

Sem Sokha, a secretary of state at the Ministry of Social Affairs, British ambassador Andrew Mace, and Ka Sunbaunat, chairman of the National Program for Mental Health, are among the dignitaries expected to attend Saturday's opening.

Ragamuffin is the first centre in Phnom Penh where professional creative arts therapy, trainings, supervision, and consultancy will be provided.

"While we are very serious about our work, our centre is also a place to have a lot of fun and laughter," Kit Loring said.

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