

Getting to Know Our First Grant Recipient, Banteay Srei: An Interview with Nhuanh Ly, Program Coordinator of Banteay Srei

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The Devata Giving Circle, the only Cambodian American giving circle in the country, was founded in 2010. In that same year, we were able to make our first grant to Banteay Srei, a non-profit organization based in Oakland, California that targets Southeast Asian women and girls aged 14 to 19 who are at risk of or are being sexually exploited.

The process in choosing a grantee included site visits, due diligence, and an official vote by members of the Devata Giving Circle's Executive Council. Our decision of choosing Banteay Srei was unanimous. We found that their mission greatly aligned with ours and with their work located in Oakland, we felt that a grant awarded to them would indeed directly affect the community.

Nhuanh Ly has been has been Program Coordinator with Banteay Srei since 2008.

About Banteay Srei

Tell us how Banteay Srei started and why it's needed.

Because Southeast Asian involvement in commercial sexual exploitation is more underground and less visible than other populations (i.e. many of them don't walk the streets, but get exposure through other mediums such as internet sites) coupled with the high media coverage of international trafficking involving Southeast Asian girls and young women, there was (and still is) a high need for education on the issue on American-born Southeast Asian girls being trafficked and exploited within their own city, here in Oakland.

Its Programs

Tell us about your programs and how they came about.

Banteay programs for girls and young women expand and evolve each year and aim to be innovative in order to develop with each cohort of program participants. In seeking to empower young women impacted by sexual exploitation, Banteay Srei programs address root causes of sexual exploitation and vulnerability factors for recruitment.

- Banteay Srei's **SREI (Self-Reliant and Empowered Individual)** women's health education program is based on co-founding sister and Board Chair, Jen Lee's, MPH master's thesis.
- Our **SAUCE (Southeast Asian Unity through Cultural Exploration)** intergenerational cooking program was developed through former staff members' experiences of identifying cooking as a powerful tool for intergenerational dialogue and building support networks.
- Our **HOLGA (Hopes, Obstacles, Love, Gratitude, And...)** photo documentary program was based on the Photo Voices curriculum and is used as a tool for young women to express themselves and share stories through photography and writing as art forms.
- The **Bong Srei (Older Sister)** youth leadership programming was developed as the result of the high retention rate of our programs. We began to see girls stay with the program year after year and realized the responsibility to create further opportunities for their development. After having implemented the Bong Srei program for over five years, we are now seeing the high retention rate of Bong Sreis, and, therefore, are addressing the need to even further the leadership development pipeline for the young women.

Its Members

Tell us about your members. What are some of the struggles they face?

One of the things that breaks my heart is that our girls are exposed to so much community violence. The area in which Banteay Srei is based is in the twenties (in terms on avenue numbers), also known as "the Murder Dubs." Our mothers and grandmothers came from war-torn lands, and the girls are also growing up in a battlefield. When I ask the girls about issues they face that make involvement in the sex trade appealing to their peers, they never fail to mention the lack of job opportunities—for themselves as well as for their families. The visibility of commercial sexual exploitation in our community also creates a struggle. It is not uncommon that predators will attempt to recruit the girls—whether it's by hollering at them from their cars or through seducing them as a boyfriend figure. This is why it's crucial for Banteay

Srei to raise awareness among youth about the exploitative nature of the commercial sex trade and create opportunities for self-empowerment. Though there are many struggles that the girls face in our community, they are extremely resilient and powerful.

The Community

What has been the response from the community?

Because our work and programming is diverse, we are able to receive exposure and support in diverse forms. We receive support from people who are interested in our work as a part of the domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) field. The way that others see our work is DMST work “in disguise.” This works to our advantage because the girls and their families don’t want Banteay Srei girls to be known as girls who are involved in prostitution (and the reality is—many of them aren’t, but all of them live in a community that is heavily impacted by it) and neither do we. We want community members to see our programming as a youth development, self-empowerment program—which all youth deserve whether they’ve had involvement in sexual exploitation directly or not.

About Nhuanh

Tell us about your background before joining Banteay Srei.

In the summer of 2006, I lived in the slums of Phnom Penh with a family while interning at Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center (CWCC) that serves women and children who are survivors of trafficking and other forms of violence. I currently live in the San Antonio neighborhood of Oakland (where Banteay Srei’s base is) and have worked with youth in many different capacities including: mentoring, community outreach, family engagement, academic tutoring, and arts-based programming.

The Grant

Why is it significant to get a grant from the Devata Giving Circle?

When we ask the girls who they imagine our funders to look like, they often describe a white man wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase. Funding from the Devata Giving Circle is breaking down that image and empowering the girls to know that funders can also look similar to them. Banteay Srei’s tag line is: “Southeast Asian young women empowering ourselves and our communities.”

How have you used the grant?

Banteay Srei was recently able to create opportunities within the organization to further build upon the leadership development of two young women: Monica and YaYa. Monica began in Banteay Srei as a youth participant over five years ago and continued to grow as a stellar leader. The girls really see her as a trusted mentor and true *bong srei*. In January 2010, seeing that she was beginning to outgrow her Bong Srei youth facilitator role, we created a junior staff position for her. Devata funding helped to sustain that junior staff position and we are also pleased to announce that we were able to raise additional funds to hire her on as a half-time staff that began a couple of weeks ago, on May 9! Monica currently implements the SREI women’s health program.

YaYa also began in Banteay Srei as a youth participant, and served as a Bong Srei youth leader for over four years. Devata funding has been tremendous in supporting the development of another junior staff position, which YaYa has filled with tremendous energy and growth development. We piloted the Bong Srei program within the SAUCE program beginning this past February. With her strong skills in making intergenerational connections and talent in the arts, we hired YaYa as a junior staff, co-implementing the SAUCE program and mentoring and training the Bong Srei for SAUCE. It’s been four months since the expansion of the SAUCE program incorporating levels of youth leadership and cascading mentorship and as we’re approaching the end of the pilot period, we are looking forward to continuing this model for the next program year.

How can we reach you or Banteay Srei?

You can reach me at nhuanh@banteaysrei.org. You can also visit our website at www.girlsempoweringthemselves.com.