

Celebrating Iowa's Legacy of sharing

On Monday night, the second annual Hoover-Wallace Dinner will honor the work of individuals and organizations who came to the aid of starving refugees in Southeast Asia a quarter century ago.

The Iowa SHARES Program (Iowa Sends Help to Aid Refugees and End Starvation) rushed food, medicine and medical personnel to the Thai/Cambodian border in 1979, saving thousands of lives.

Main speakers for the evening will be former Iowa Gov. Robert Ray and former Vice President Walter Mondale, who spearheaded U.S. efforts to

assist the refugees. Ray also was instrumental in welcoming Southeast Asian refugees to resettle in Iowa starting in 1975. We invited Ray, Mondale and Sone Lovan, a Laotian native whose family resettled in Des Moines, to write about their experiences.

The dinner celebrates Iowa's rich legacy in feeding the world and alleviating human suffering. It pays homage to the achievements of two native Iowans, former President Herbert Hoover, who delivered food to Europe during World War I, and former Vice President Henry Wallace, whose agricultural innovations increased food production and nutrition.



Malnourished: An "intensive feeding station" was set up in Sa Kaew, Thailand.

Effort made more impressive by teamwork

The story of Iowa SHARES began in November 1979, in an open field at a place called Sa Kaew, in eastern Thailand on the Cambodian border.

There, approximately 30,000 emaciated Cambodians, fleeing the genocidal Pol Pot regime, had stumbled across the border in search of food and refuge. Stunned and starving, they had no food, shelter or way to survive. Fifty to 100 were dying each day, their bodies dumped in a mass grave.

They were, as we would later discover, just the tip of an immense human depredation, unrivaled in the second half of the 20th century, and one of the worst in all human history.

Of the 7 million Cambodians alive in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge took control of the country and installed their radical regime, 2 million were dead by 1979. The rest were starving and in desperate need of food and medicine.

There was no CNN or Internet to convey the images of this human suffering to the rest of the world. Rather, the story was carried back by individuals who traveled to the Sa Kaew refugee camp.

Within its first week of existence, the camp was visited by a delegation led by first lady Roselyn Carter and a separate group of governors brought there



Thankful: Villagers gather around the food provided by Iowa SHARES.

FILE PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Never sell short the generosity, heart of Iowans

Following the end of the war in Vietnam, Iowans were confronted with several great humanitarian challenges in regard to refugees from Indochina. Looking back, the people of Iowa can take great pride in how, as a state, we dramatically impacted the lives of thousands of innocent refugees.

In 1975, soon after the fall of Saigon, I received a letter written on behalf of the Tai Dam, a distinct ethnic group from Laos. Their letter was a plea for some state or community to accept them as a group, so that their culture, language and ethnic ties would not disappear, but provide them strength in a strange new world.

I persuaded the federal government to let Iowa be the new home for the Tai Dam, and the generous spirit of the people of Iowa made this effort a success. As would be the case time and again, Iowa organizations, churches and individuals stepped forward to open their homes and their communities. State government gave emphasis to finding jobs for the new arrivals. Schools and teachers provided special English-language instruction and classes for adults to acquaint them with American customs.

By 1976, the Tai Dam, as well as the Vietnamese and Laotian refugees who had settled in Iowa, had become hard-working members of our



WALTER MONDALE



ROBERT RAY

Carter and a separate group of governors brought there by Iowa Gov. Bob Ray. The photos and haunting descriptions they brought back spurred our government and our people to action.

In Washington, President Carter directed urgent assistance. In Iowa, the photos that the governor took and his compelling first-hand testimony about the extent of human misery were first published in The Des Moines Register and then spread across the state by other media.

I have been enormously impressed by the story of how Iowa's major religions and its media came together with the governor to form Iowa SHARES (Iowa Sends Help to Aid Refugees and End Starvation).

Remarkably, relying on small, individual contributions sent by people around the state, Iowa SHARES amassed close to \$600,000 from Thanksgiving to Christmas. The money was used to rush food, medicine and medical personnel to Cambodia. It seemed particularly appropriate that the first shipment of food and medicine arrived at the Cambodian border on Christmas Day 1979.

I am especially pleased that there was a marvelous Minnesota/Iowa connection in carrying out one other aspect of the Iowa SHARES campaign. When Iowa doctors and nurses volunteered to go to the Thai/Cambodian border to provide life-saving medical care, Iowa SHARES needed to find a partner with whom to work. After exploring possibilities with a number of larger, traditional relief organizations, Iowa SHARES partnered with a new group just organized in Minneapolis called the American Refugee Committee (ARC).

I was told that the ARC was chosen because of its get-the-job-done approach to relief. The ARC set up a field hospital made of thatched huts at a place called Khao-I-Dong. The sprawling camp of 30,000 people in Sa Kaew had grown into a city of more than 350,000 Cambodians.

The Iowa medical team, led by Dr. Bill Rosenfeld of Mason City, arrived shortly after the hospital was opened. The days for the medical staff were long and intense. Dr. Rosenfeld said at the time that in four days he had seen more acute medicine than he would see in the rest of his life.

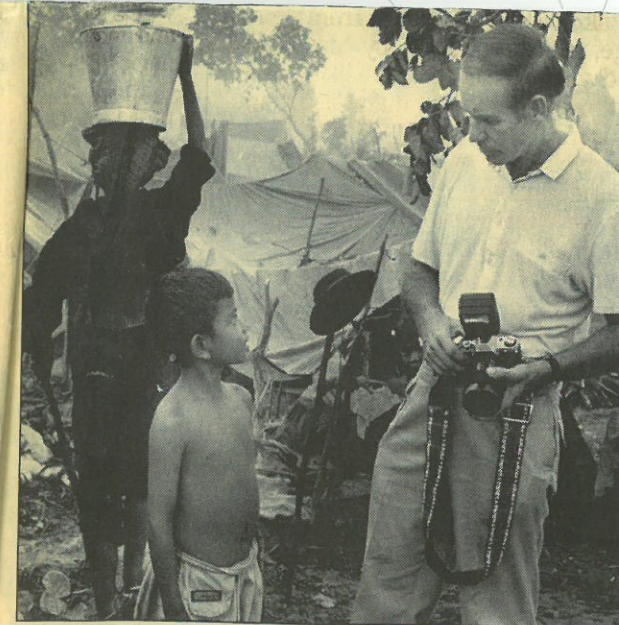
Iowa SHARES also worked through Catholic Relief Services and UNICEF to meet the urgent need inside Cambodia for food for children. The contributions of Iowa SHARES, along with those of people from my home state of Minnesota and from all across America, combined with the efforts of our federal government, helped keep 5 million people from starvation.

I feel very honored to have been invited to be a special guest at the Hoover-Wallace Dinner on March 14 in Des Moines, when those heroic efforts of a quarter century ago will be recalled. I look forward to sharing in the memories of how Iowans and Minnesotans came together and reached half-way around the world to save lives.

WALTER MONCALE was U.S. vice president from 1977-1981.



A look back: Above, trucks of supplies from Iowa fuel up on Christmas morning in 1979 before heading for Cambodia. At right, Iowa Gov. Robert Ray talks to a Cambodian boy.



Thank you for your gifts, Iowa

I am here in Iowa today because 30 years ago I was given a chance to live, to learn and to grow.

I'll start my story on a late April day in 1949, when I was 9 years old. It was the day my parents decided that my family was moving to Nongpenh, a small village in another part of Laos where my maternal grandparents lived. The village is close to the Mekong River, the only route to cross from Laos to Thailand.

I was told later that my mother, my four sisters and I moved to Nongpenh for about three weeks before my father came after us. This was planned so that no one would suspect my parents' plan to flee Laos.

When I asked my father why we had to leave our home and our country, he told me how difficult life had been while growing up under communist rule in Vietnam during the 1950s. He did not want his children to experience that. He left because he wanted to give us the chance of having a better future. To us that means having the freedom to speak and to choose to become whatever you want to be.

On May 11, my family escaped from Laos by boat to Nongkhai, Thailand, during daylight. At that point, we did not have to sneak out in the middle of the night, risking being shot, as my relatives did when they left Laos a few years later.

When we arrived in Nongkhai, the people had set up housing made out of hay on the banks of a Buddhist temple surrounded by tall trees. I recall my family's living area being located in front of a group of the tombstones, and the kids used the area as a playground. Playing there did not bother me then because I had the security of my family nearby. Now, it gives me chills. I'm standing among the dead. I also remember my parents standing in long lines to receive donated rice and other food.

We lived in the refugee camp until October when we were accepted to come to the United States. I've since learned about some of the key individuals who were responsible for bringing me and thousands

others to Iowa. They include Gov. Robert Ray, Ambassador Kenneth Quinn and professor Art Crisfield. They spoke for me when I had no voice. They reached out and helped me when things seemed hopeless.

I've since learned that Crisfield wrote more than 30 letters to governors across the United States, seeking help for the refugees. The only governor who responded and was willing to take us in was Governor Ray. His accomplishments are many, but the one that personally impacted me is the leadership he set for Iowans to accept refugees and immigrants. I appreciate his ability to envision the richness that diversity could bring to the people of Iowa.

On Oct. 29, my family and more than 300 Southeast Asian refugees arrived at the Des Moines airport. We were greeted by sponsors, mostly people from churches throughout Iowa. Our sponsors helped us with enrolling in school, job searches, grocery shopping, looking for housing and taking us to dental and medical appointments. They made the transition easier with their warm greetings, smiles, their belief in us and the laughs they shared with us when mistakes or misunderstandings occurred.

My greatest challenge in life was to finish college and pass the state nursing exam. During college, I thought about quitting, but I could not disappoint or hurt my parents. I remembered my dad walking a few miles each way to and from work in the rain and snow, or to Roosevelt High School for an ESL night class. I thought about all the sacrifices he made to come to this country so that I might have a better future. Those memories gave me the strength and courage to finish school.

Thirty years ago, Iowans gave younger generations like mine opportunities to go after our dreams. On behalf of all the young refugees who grew up here, I thank this state's residents for giving us a place called "Iowa" that we can now call home.

SONE LOVAN of West Des Moines is a nurse at Monroe Elementary in Des Moines.

waves crushed one of the boats. Hundreds of innocent people, most of them women and children, were thrust into the churning sea. Those too weak to swim in the powerful waves drowned. It was a stunning sight of human suffering.

As I watched this tragedy unfold, I wondered: What could we do? What should we do?

Inspired by Iowans' earlier generosity and concern for the Tai Dam, I felt that we could not and should not turn our backs on the boat people, despite polls indicating considerable opposition to admitting refugees.

Late that night, I wrote to President Carter to tell him that Iowa would double its refugee population, if only the United States would restart its refugee resettlement program to welcome the boat people.

A few months later, I traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, with Vice President Walter Mondale to attend a U.N. conference on the boat people. There, in one of the most dramatic moments I have ever witnessed, the vice president told the delegates that America would reopen its program and accept 168,000 new refugees each year. The boat people were saved.

The diplomats and others at the conference sprang to their feet and cheered for what America was doing to lead the world in rescuing these suffering refugees. It was a proud moment for me as an American.

Several months later, we created Iowa SHARES. Under the leadership of Kenneth Quinn, who later became ambassador to Cambodia and now leads the World Food Prize, Iowans again demonstrated their concern for the hungry by contributing generously to send food, medicine and medical personnel to Thailand to save starving Cambodian refugees. This tradition was carried on by my successor, Gov. Terry Branstad, whose Iowa CARES program in 1983 helped alleviate mass starvation in Ethiopia.

I take away three lessons from those times: First, we have been paid back many times over by the contributions these refugees have made to our state and communities. Second, it is amazing what we can accomplish when we put partisan differences aside and work together. And, third, you can never underestimate the generosity and goodness of the people of Iowa.

ROBERT RAY was governor of Iowa from 1969-1983.