

ROCK SENIOR MEMBERS

**Journey Story of RoCK Senior Members Building
Pathway for LGBT+ Community in Cambodia**



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Collette O'Regan

RoCK's Deputy Chair Board of Directors and Co-founder

INTRODUCTION

As an introduction to stories of senior active members and members of Rainbow Community Kampuchea Organisation (RoCK), we recall stories and good memories with Collette O'Regan, RoCK's Deputy Chair Board of Directors and Co-founder.

The story of Pride event in 2009

In 2009, a group of volunteers Claire, Alan, Meg, and Collette O'Regan, met up for their casual and friend meet-up, and an assumption over whether there are lesbian persons in Cambodia came up. At the time, the visibility of the gay and transgender woman community was more prominent within the public health and HIV/AIDS eradication programs, while the lesbian community was hardly to be seen. With the guide from a colleague in Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), Collette was able to call and leave messages inviting some main NGOs who were implementing programs addressing HIV/AIDS issues. Some representatives who showed up included Noy Sitha, Pheng Sanh, Chork Sophorn from the Women's Network Unity (WNU), and Pisey Ly from Women's Agenda for Change (WAC), whose stories are in this collection, and names were mentioned. From February to May 2009, the process went on some weekends, started simply by getting to know each other, sharing the experience of Pride event from different countries, that people came together and making friends. The Pride event Organizing Committee was formed as a result of the process. By 17th May, within the national holiday; the birthday ceremony of His Majesty Preah Bat Samdech Norodom Sihamoni, King of the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Cambodian Pride event was organized with the participation of lesbian, gay, transgender men, and transgender women, which lasted for the whole week.



Pride week poster celebration in 2009

Started with a mandate

The event inspired Sitha and Sanh so much that they happily came to Collette and asked what could be done after this gathering. The question of “Who Are We” which led to another process of consulting LGBT+ community members as a needs assessment or consultation workshop which was organized at the Men’s Health Cambodia (MHC) office. The consultation workshop was to understand the problems and prioritize issues of each identity within the community: Gay men, Transgender women, and Lesbian persons. The discussion also unpacked the identities of lesbian and transgender men, and some people there were able to learn that there’s a name for an identity that could be aligned with them. They raised questions like “Is that possible?” The discussion was a moment of self-discovery and learning.

RoCK's mandate to address discrimination toward the LGBT+ community in Cambodia emerged from the priorities set from this participatory workshop and produced as a **“Who We Are”** document, a core document of RoCK, that brought clarity and laid concrete foundation. Although RoCK had attracted the interest of funders, RoCK was taking the process step by step, staying grounded and not making the mistake of building on money or funding- rather they stayed focused on building the community. Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK) as a name is the essence of the connectedness between the LGBT+ community in Cambodia and the global community represented by the color of the rainbow. The herstory of RoCK also reflected the name.

Memorable moments

During the 2012 ASEAN LGBT+ Pride held at Baitong restaurant, we had friends from all the ASEAN countries members, except Brunei. At the event, there was a session of sharing from the mother of a gay son from Vietnam who told their stories, how the mother and gay son reconciled after their child expressed their pain of not being accepted for who they are by his mother. Cambodian friends cried because they were so inspired of the fact that the mom could accept their children and hoped parents in Cambodia could accept them, through RoCK's work.



LGBT+ Pride Week in 2012



LGBT+ Pride Week in 2014

The event allowed friends in different countries to spend time together in one room. Therefore, some in-depth reflective learning arose. We had learned from friends in Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia: 1) Cambodia is a relatively safe place for the LGBT+ community 2) Things that cannot happen in one place/country, we still can make happen in another place/country such as movie screening and poster exhibition that challenge homophobic views in some countries could be screened and displayed in Phnom Penh. People can livestream and make a way that could be visible in their countries as well. Cambodia friends could also learn the different contexts of the countries and shift their perception and realize that the LGBT+ community everywhere had to be active and walk their walk, and could see the possibility in their situation and use it. Another memorable event was the ILGA Asia Conference in December 2017 which welcomed 281 participants from 35 countries that majority are in the region². We showed that Cambodia can do it once again.

²ILGA Asia Conference 2017 report. Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a84777f64b05fa9644483fe/t/5ada6d2d6d2a737be97ae451/1524264258356/7TH_ILGA_ASIA_CONFERENCE-REPORT-FINAL-APRIL2018.pdf



Pride Week celebration in 2014 at Sweden Embassy in Cambodia

Messages to younger generation

“ For the past 14 years, RoCK has been growing solid and achieved a lot and the contribution of senior active members is very important. They survived the worst time in Cambodia and stayed true to who they were. Nobody can say LGBT+ people are not strong, a modern thing, or a foreign influence. They are the living evidence of resilience and strength. I hope that the younger generation can also appreciate this value as I do. One important message to younger generation is that changes keep happening just like a boat sailing on the sea, sometimes it can be a storm. What can help us as RoCK to deal with the storm and the changes is continue to internalized RoCK values, and it will help us make good decisions when we face difficult situations.”



NOY SITHA

A Transgender Man Living in Sangkat Boeung Tumpun,
Khan Meanchey, Phnom Penh

Mr. Noy Sitha or Pa³ Sitha was born in 1951 in Bati District, Takeo Province. Currently he is living in Phnom Penh. He identifies himself as a man, or, as we call it now, a transgender man or a trans man. He knew he was a boy since the age of eight, but it wasn't until he was 13 or 16 that he cut his hair short and started to dress up fully as himself. As a child, when playing the game of marriage, he always played the role of a husband because it was a role he considered to suit him well. But he did not come out until when he was sure he was in love with a woman as an adult. His personality and appearance did not receive much negative reaction from his family, as his father often referred to him as "Ah Pov⁴" or "Ah Pros⁵". The people in his village did not mind or say inappropriate words about him and other LGBT+ people in general. He cited an example that in the village there was also a transgender man who could marry a transgender woman and lived together normally. Pa Sitha loves and has talent in arts. He has been performing classical drama since he was a child. He continued this career and came to Phnom Penh to work as a singer, for both classical and modern songs, at the Radio National Kampuchea (RNK). After that, he became a government official working for RNK under the Ministry of Information. He is now retired and stays at home with his wife to take care of his grandchildren.

Getting together and building a community

In 1968, he came to live and work in Phnom Penh, where he met and got together with friends, most of whom were transgender men and their partners. "*Each time we met, there were around 30 couples of us; sometimes we went out and came to stay together at my house,*" he said. "Some parents who did not accept their LGBT+ children came to my house and I helped to conciliate and persuade them until they could agree and accept their children."

³ Meaning: a father

⁴ Meaning: the youngest child

⁵ Meaning: a boy



Noy Sitha and his wife (Mother Rouen) in the occasion of Pride Week in 2012

In 2001, Pa Sitha met with a transgender women friend working for an organization called Women’s Network for Unity (WNU). He was asked for help organizing LGBT+ people or “Tomboy” identity like himself as at that time they did not use the term transgender yet. He also learned about the importance of organizing and helping to build focal person at various target areas to support and protect each other from vulnerabilities, especially discrimination and violence. In 2009, Pa Sitha met with other co-founders of the Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK). They discussed about the initiative to build an LGBT+ community focusing on their living situations, life experiences, needs and goals. He and his two other trans men friends, Mr. Pheng Sanh and Mr. Chak Sophoan, started to work on a volunteer basis to organize LGBT+ community members, including transgender men, and their partners who identified themselves as women and transgender women. He organized those who were already in his network as well as whom he did not know before who lived in various provinces. The three of them often went around on their motorcycles together to the suburbs of Phnom Penh and other provinces near Phnom Penh. They packed and ate their home-cooked meals together; this has become unforgettable memories of their struggle and hard work together. But unfortunately, due to sickness, Mr. Chak Sophoan

passed away in 2011. Thus, the remaining two friends continued their mission to build the LGBT+ community.



Noy Sitha with Pheng Sanh and Chak Sophoan were taken in 2010

Their search and efforts to reach out to LGBT+ people continued and it evolved into an initiative to develop provincial focal points or representatives and they travelled from one province to another to connect their community network and make friends. Those who had already been organized in one province were also introduced to other friends and they helped to find other people whom they were yet to know in that province. In some areas, Pa Sitha also went to ask for help from commune chiefs who would guide him to the villages he should go and be able to meet with LGBT+ community members. As a result, RoCK had more and more members as well as a growing network of local authorities who were potential supporters of LGBT+ in 24 provinces and Phnom Penh. In addition, Pa Sitha used his skills and talents in arts, such as his song composing and singing skills to share about stories and real-life experiences encountered by the LGBT+ community to serve as messages to reduce discrimination.

Public parade with pride and confidence



Tuk Tuk Parade of LGBT+ community at Phnom Penh in 2016

“Imagine how proud and excited I was,” said Pa Sitha, recalling the activities of Pride Week and International Human Rights Day organized by RoCK. “As a person who used to walk shyly, but at one point we came together with a large number of us with Tuk-Tuk parade and walking publicly and proudly, wearing rainbow T-shirt and flag with the words “LGBT+ Pride” to show to the many people who were looking at us, who we were. We picked up trash to show to the public that even though we were LGBT+, we could get involved in social and public activities.”



Noy Sitha with Pheng Sanh were in the occasion of Pride week in 2016

From 2013 to 2016, Pa Sitha became a staff member of the RoCK and continued to work to organize LGBT+ members. Now, he continues to engage with RoCK in activities such as the national advocacy program through dialogues with representatives of the Royal Government of Cambodia. His message to the next generation of LGBT+ community members: *“I am very happy and proud to see the community members I organized become active, courageous and able to hold a microphone and speak in front of senior officials from ministries and national institutions. RoCK is a strong LGBT+ organization. It is like a boat that will carry all of us forward, but as members we must be united and help each other to think for better options. We are united like a bunch of sticks staying together to become unbreakable.”*

Although with old age, poor health, and being a retiree, RoCK community and Pa Sitha have never been far from each other. We always keep in touch. He has always been participating in events organized by RoCK in a friendly, cheerful and active manner. Just like what we keep saying: age is just a number; the most important thing is our undying love, respect and support for each other.

RoCK community and people of younger generation are thankful and highly appreciate your perseverance, dedication and contribution to the building of the RoCK community. Your legacy is always in our heart!



LGBT+ community in the occasion of dialogue with Cambodia government in 2023



PHENG SANH

A Transgender Man Living in Suong Municipality,
Tboung Khmum Province

“Hello, are you an LGBT+ too?”

“What’s up brother?”

“Er ... I’m an LGBT+ like you! I have a wife waiting for me at home ... ”

“Yes, brother. I also have a wife at home!”

Above is how Pheng Sanh started a conversation with someone he perceived to be LGBT+ in order to initiate to process to organize new member. He was born a woman but he identifies himself as a man. People in the community call him Pa Sanh. He was born in 1952, therefore, as of 2023, father Sanh is 71 years old He was born in Khsach Kandal district, Kandal province, and he is now living with his wife in Suong municipality, Tboung Khmum province. Pa Sanh is another co-founder of the Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK) and later on he became an LGBT+ community organizer who contributed to RoCK’s core works, i.e., to empower and promote participation and strengthen LGBT+ community strong solidarity.

Recalling his past, Pa Sanh said, *“When I was young, I did not consider myself as a woman. Regarding my appearance, I told people that I wanted to cut my hair short just like that Grandma!”* He pointed his finger to a woman with short hair as he was speaking. When he went to herd his cattle, he wore only trousers with a scarf as his waistband. When Pa Sanh was about 10 years old he could have a lot of time to spend with his friends to play bowl, volley ball and marble games because most of the time his father (whom he called Tia) went to work and his mother went to sell things. At home, they raised pigs, chickens and planted banana trees in their backyard. Although Pa Sanh was small-built, he was never lazy and able to lift large baskets easily. Because of his attitude and how he did his work, people called him “Ah Skuoy” or “Ah Stiev”, i.e., local slangs referring to a man with a naughty character. Although these terms connote someone naughty, Pa Sanh was happy to be called by those words. Recalling this, he giggled and amused with himself, admitting that he was really naughty.

When he was 14, Pa Sanh started to fall in love with a girl who was his classmate. As a daughter during his generation, Pa Sanh's parents were very strict with him both in terms of going out at night and the choice of clothes; his parents did not allow him even to wear the traditional pants for men. During festivals, Pa Sanh always took his brother's clothes to wear and sneaked out at night to meet his love partner. Sometimes he felt that he was different as he was a woman but he had love attraction to another woman and that he has a masculine personality. Talking about this brought tears to his eyes.



Pheng Sanh was in the workshop with local authorities at Kampong Chhnang province in 2016

During the years around 1962, Pa Sanh used to see gay men and men with feminine personality with long hair and dressed up as women living in his village. Most of them worked as silk weavers. At that time, there was no word for LGBT+ yet, and inevitably, some people called them by various derogatory terms. Cases of forced separation and forced marriage also happened. Pa Sanh reflects, *“As an LGBT+, you cannot change, even you are restrained by chain or forced to marry someone of the opposite sex, or even after you have children, you remain*

an LGBT+”.

In 1984, when he was selling tomatoes and potatoes, Pa Sanh met with Pa Sitha, Mae⁶ Vy and Pa Thorn there at the market. When they met, they realized they had the same identity; so, they became friends with each other. Pa Sitha took Pa Sanh to had his hair cut short like a man for the first time in his life. Pa Sanh was very happy to be able to cut his hair the way he liked it. Later, Pa Sanh joined a community called WNU who worked with vulnerable population sex workers including LGBT+. Later on, WNU established another organization called the Community Legal Service to provide legal protection services for sex workers. Pa Sanh was selected to work as a community support staff who provide hotline counseling services through telephone. Through his work, Pa Sanh started to get involved with some activities of RoCK. He used his knowledge and skills to organize and communicate with LGBT+ community members.

Recalling about the time when he joined with RoCK, Pa Sanh reminisced about the time he met with Collette, another co-founder of RoCK. At that time, RoCK was an LGBT+ community working on a voluntary basis in Cambodia and it was not yet registered as a non-governmental organization. Pa Sanh was surprised to learn about lesbian identity from Collette; previously, Pa Sanh and others thought only Tomboys were LGBT+! This was a surprising experience and an eye opener for them. With this, he realized that there was a lot broader knowledge about LGBT+ that he and his community had to explore and learn more. With this, his interest in the LGBT+ community increased.

During Pride Week, organized for the first time by RoCK in 2009, Pa Sanh thought that he wanted to do something for other LGBT+ people. Then he started it by joining as a member of RoCK’s Board of Directors. From 2015 to 2016, he continued to work for RoCK as a full-time staff to organize LGBT+ community members in different provinces together with other team members of RoCK.

⁶Meaning: a mother

He said, “I consider RoCK as my heart; and my heart represents the heart of LGBT+!”



Building relationship with local authorities in 2016



LGBT+ with local authorities after workshop at Kampong Chhnang province in 2016

When he goes to organize LGBT+ members at the grassroots level, his eyes dance around to search for people with the same identity as well as trans women. The first thing he notices is their appearance and their haircut. Even though a person does not cut their hair short, he still can recognize them through their behavior. After their greeting and initial chitchatting, he asks for their contact number and invite them to join RoCK’s activities and programs as a member of the LGBT+ community.

Pa Sanh is an agent who constructed a network of LGBT+ community members for the next generation to keep in touch to strengthen relationship and trust, and some members also become active members of RoCK. Active members are involved in community organizing and advocacy activities to meet their basic needs and to respect and protect their human rights, to prevent stigma and discrimination so that LGBT+ people can live their life fully as Cambodian citizens.



Activity of organizing LGBT+ member in 2016

From his observation, LGBT+ are courageous and dare to express themselves as who they are; they recognize and accept themselves, and dare to come out and express their gender identity. Pa Sanh is happy to be able to contribute through his sharing about human rights of LGBT+ people to others, especially among the LGBT+ community itself so that they know about their rights and be more courageous.

Pa Sanh has been an important part of RoCK's community building whose pioneering legacy is recognized, respected and loved. People of the next generations will take up the pathway he has paved for us and carry on the work toward achieving our common goal for LGBT+ community in Cambodia to live openly, happily, peacefully and equally today and in the future.



MEY CHANTHORN

OFFICIAL NAME: TITH MANN

A Transgender Man Living in Bakan District,
Pursat Province



Mey Chanthorn in 2012

Ta⁷ Thorn is another senior person in the RoCK community. He was born in 1951 and has lived and seen many social changes. He identified himself as a man and cut his hair short. He liked to wear pants since he was eight years old. But the way he dressed himself up at that time was due to his personal preference, not because of his realization of himself being a man. When he went to school, he always wore baggy pants but he always had a skirt ready inside his school bag. Fortunately, he had a kind teacher who never forbade or scold his way of dressing. He always dressed like this

until he was in his 20s, when he fell in love with a woman who later on become wife until today. It was at that time when he realized that he was in a woman's body but with a heart of a man. During the Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot regime, when people were forced out of their own homes to live collectively, Ta Thorn brought his wife, Yeay⁸ Thol, out of her hometown to live together with him in Bakan district, Pursat Province. Ta Thorn would plow the land and Yeay Thol cooked for them. Ta Thorn recalled, "The group chief kept feeling curious why the two of us who were apparently friends would looked after each other very intimately as if we were a couple." When they were assigned to go to different groups, Yeay always requested to be in the same group with Ta and no one would take any action against them. At the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, the two went on different path. Ta moved out from Pursat to do business in other provinces. At one point, he started selling fabric and vegetable as he guessed this would allow him to earn more money; then he decided to move to Phnom Penh. Then he travelled further to Bati district, Takeo Province to look for grandmother Thol.

⁷ Meaning: grandfather

⁸ Meaning: grandmother

Only after he found her and knew the location of her house very well that he returned to Phnom Penh. After sometimes, Ta Thorn asked 4 or 5 close friends to go with him to collect Yeay Thol to come to live in Phnom Penh together. They both came to live in Phnom Penh. Because Ta already knew how to run a shop, and Yeay also started learning to do it, both of them helped each other to expand their business. Before they could get along and able to live with each other until now, they faced many the obstacles and underwent many episodes of being separated by their family and relatives. Although with all of that as well as the fact that Yeay was in poor health, Ta never abandons her. Instead, he has always been by her side to take care of her with great love and affection; this has been the energy and motivation for them to keep on struggling until they could overcome all obstacles.



Dul Thol and Mey Chanthorn in 2016

Ta Thon knew and was a close friend of Mr. Noy Sitha, who also identified himself as a transgender man during Pol Pot regime. Having another person

with the same identity with him allowed him to feel more confident and able to be himself more comfortably. This fraternity was also a part of the bond of friendship for LGBT+ community that started to appear gradually in Cambodian society. Pa Sitha also kept in touch with Ta Thorn and invited him to meetings organized by WNU. Pa Sitha later introduced Ta Thorn to RoCK, an organization working on LGBT+ issues, and wanted to invite him to attend a gathering activities in Phnom Penh. Seeing so many people with similar identities and being able to come out fully at the meeting gave more hope and courage to him as a transgender man. *“I thought to myself that from now on LGBT+ people are free to travel and young people will have right to get married, adopt children and register,”* he recalled.



Offering alms to monks during LGBT+ Pride Week 2016

In 2013, Ta Thorn started organizing LGBT+ members; he would approach people with similar appearance and behavior as himself. He would observe, ask for phone numbers and encourage them to join RoCK's activities in Phnom Penh so that they could have a voice. He also kept in touch and organized workshops

on LGBT+ rights with local authorities in his commune and nearby communes. One of the challenges he faced in his context 10 years ago was the fact that the members who had already been organized often changed their phone numbers. For this reason, he had to go look for them and visited them again and again to be able to remain in touch. The motivating factor for him to organize members of the LGBT+ community in his district was because he found from his experience that when they had to go through hardship, they could help each other. For example, when parents attempted to separate and prevent their children from living together, Ta Thorn went to talk and explain to them to understand the reasons; he also shared with them stories and experiences when he was young. This helped to motivate parents of both sides to accept and allow their children to live together as a couple.

Ta Thorn's hope increase gradually and steadily as he remains with RoCK for the last 14 years. He says, "I see RoCK as a strong leader with supports from all levels, from the local authorities to the national level. What I appreciate the most is the fact that RoCK's leadership is harmonious and able to consult and advise each other. They are firm and courageous as they dare to talk to the Royal Government of Cambodia at all levels."

Marriage is no longer an important need for Ta and Yeay because they are old already. However, Ta Thorn keeps involved in the struggle, lending his motivation and encouragement for younger people to demand for legal marriage equality for LGBT+ people. He also hopes that young people are able to use their rights and freedom well and that they have the capacity to think carefully and wisely when choosing a partner and before making a commitment in a marriage to form a family together.

Despite his advanced age and poor health, as an elder who contributed to establish and support RoCK community, he continues to have strong commitment to support, encourage and give good advice to young members of RoCK community. His conducts are very priceless and greatly valued.



Mey Chanthorn was with local authorities at Bakan district in 2019



DUL THOL

A Lesbian Living in Bakan District, Pursat Province

Yeay Dul Thol is 73 years old (born 1950). She was born as a woman with female gender identity. She was born in Bati district, Takeo province, but came to live with Ta Mann, called Ta Thorn in Bakan district, Pursat province from 2000 to the present. It is interesting that sometime Yeay Thol calls Yeay Mann (refers to grandmother as female gender) and other time calls Ta Thorn (refers to grandfather as male gender) Yeay Thol and I were sitting on an over 20 years old bed, a remnant from their previous home when they lived in Phnom Penh. She was smiling while recalling: *“During my time, as soon as you were a little grown up, our elders would arrange a marriage for us; most of the time it was to someone from village or even our own relatives, because they did not want to lose any of their properties or family line.”* This reminded me of an old saying, “Trading near is better than trading far.” Now, back to our story. Back in the 1960s, during her teenage years, not long after she turned into her adolescent age, civil war broke out in the country, i.e., from 1970 to 1975 it was Khmer Republic or Lon Nol regime and then it was Pol Pot or Khmer Rouge regime. During that time, everyone was evacuated from their hometown and separated from their families and relatives. Yeay Thol was also evacuated by the Khmer Rouge from her hometown to live in Pursat province. It was then that she first met her current partner, Ta Thorn. Both Yeay Thol and Ta Thorn were very close and they cared about each other very much. They did not want to be far from each other.

After the war ended, during early 1980s, Yeay Thol returned to her hometown in Bati district, Takeo Province, hoping to reunite with her family. However, things did not go as planned. Regardless of the situation, she continued to live with her new life in her hometown. At that time, many people voted for her to work in the economy unit in her commune. In that role, she distributed rice and food to people in need during the time after they returned from Khmer Rouge regime. Reflecting on this, she had extraordinary abilities, because it was not easy for a 20-year-old woman to work in a commune office like this at that time.



Dul Thol in 2020

Many men wanted marry her at that time but she did not agree. When she was working in her hometown, Ta Thorn was searching for news about her everywhere. One day, he found out about her work and the location of her house. He happily went to see her because the devotion he had for her since they were together during the war time remained unchanged. Talking about this, Yeay Thol smiled and started to look at the landscape around the house because she felt shy as her children were listening. She kept her hands busy poking the mat and stretch herself a bit due to the feeling of pain. Then, she continued: *“Did you know what? ... one day, Ta Mann came to my house. This was totally unexpected to me. He asked me straightforwardly if I agreed to go to live and earn a living together with him. I said that I would rather stayed with my relatives at my hometown and I would not go anywhere.”* At the time, her relatives were not happy either. After they talked, Ta Mann returned to Phnom Penh because he had her fabric trading and vegetable wholesale businesses in Phnom Penh. Yeay Thol thought that maybe he would be gone forever. But then, half a month later, Ta Mann and a

few of his friends went to call her quietly in the middle of the night without letting anyone know. He asked if she would agree to go to do business together with him in the city. She agreed to follow him quietly without telling people in her family. She giggled as she was describing this as she felt astonished with her own decision at that time.

Both of them came to live together. They had businesses and became quite well-off. They even had their own house in Pet Chen (China Hospital) area. Later on, there was a fire incident on their house. After that, a middle-age lady who treated them like relatives bought a house for them next to the former US embassy. Yeay Thol described, *“it was a two-floor building; the top floor was built from wood and the ground floor was concrete, located next to the former US embassy; and on the other side of the house it was a villa of a high-ranking family.”* In addition to their businesses, at that time they also had six stalls they rented to people selling vegetables at Boeung Keng Kang Market. Yeay Thol also cooked food to serve regular monthly meals for people working in the embassy. The two of them could earn a lot of money. At the age of 40, she became ill and they spent all the money they had had earned to pay for her medical treatment. She received treatment in Cambodia as well as in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, but her condition did not get better. To this point, I as a listener became very amazed by the devoted love and care of each other; despite their illness, poverty or hardship; they would not abandon each other. In 2000, the two of them had to return to Ta Thorn’s hometown because no one else was taking care of Ta Thorn’s elderly mother. At that time, Yeay Thol herself was still sick. In the beginning, they did not have a proper house to live in so they just lived in a hut left over from Khmer Rouge time on their land today. The house they are living in today was actually built for them by a villager who borrowed a pair of cattle from them and could not afford to pay back the money as agreed, so the person asked to build this house instead.



RoCK community went to visit grandparents in 2020

They continued to live there in countryside lifestyle. Yeay Thol started growing vegetables, raising chickens and pigs. With this new livelihood activities, her family earned quite good income; their livelihood improved as well as her health. Now she stops doing those livelihood activities and focus only on looking after the house and going to pagoda. Now they wish only for peace. Grandmother never forgot to smile when telling this story to me. Of course, just like other spouse, their couple life also met with ups and downs and some conflicts as the old saying goes, “plates in the same basket rattles” Thus, the important thing is that both parties understand and tolerate each other.

Then I asked her a question: “Do you remember since when did you start to know about RoCK, an LGBT+ community?” She giggled, looked at me and replied, *“I do not remember!”* And we all laughed out loud together. Yeay is very honest and straightforward. So, I further asked: “Do you remember attending activities with the LGBT+ community in Phnom Penh?” And she replied: *“Yes, I used to go, but I do not remember what year it was. I also don’t remember who I met.”*

I only know that I have attended the community events three times.” As I ran out of questions, I gave her some hints about the time we met in Siem Reap in 2019 when we conducted consultation meeting with members in region. She immediately remembered it because it was the first time in her life being physically in Angkor Wat Temple to visit and touch the old temples. In addition to the memories mentioned above, she also mentioned about our LGBT+ community members who visited and stayed at her house. Among them, she recalled an active member, Mae Chhoeun, who were from Kampong Thom Province. What Yeay Thol could remember the most about Mae Chhoeun were her courage and talent in talking. For this reason, she always missed and asked about her well-being as if Mae Chhoeun was her own relative. Now she is getting old and often feel sick and find it difficult to travel as she feels pain and dizzy regularly.



Dul Thol was in the workshop with RoCK LGBT+ members in the northern hub in 2019

Because of this, she cannot travel far, even though she really feels like going to meet people in RoCK community during reunion program. Hence, young people from RoCK community, from Phnom Penh and Kampong Chhnang, travel to see and visit the two elders. Young people from the community who are living in nearby

villages, such as Long and his partner, whom Ta Thorn organized, also come to visit and ask for advices from the elders very often.

Yeay Thol's story is a testament to the presence of a Cambodian lesbian who have lived through many changes of life and social regimes who maintain great unconditional love; she has struggled to overcome many obstacles and remain by Ta Thorn's side until old age. These are life experiences and lessons that young people can learn and reflect for personal learning in building a couple life and family.



Mey Chanthorn and Dul Thol were together with LGBT+ community in 2018



HORN CHHOEUN

A Lesbian Living in Stung Sen District,
Kampong Thom Province

Horn Chhoeun or Mae Chhoeun identifies herself as a lesbian. She was born in Stung Sen municipality, Kampong Thom Province and has lived there until now. Growing up, Mae Chhoeun focused only on earning money to support her parents and she did not care about getting a spouse, although she got proposed by many people. During the 1980s, when she was 27-year-old, she fell in love with Pa Chorn who was 37-year-old and dressed as a man with short hair. When Mae Chhoeun asked Pa Chorn to help harvesting her paddy, it was an opportunity for them to get to know each other better. She noticed him as a gentle, hardworking and helpful person; so, she fell in love with him. She never imagined before that she would be in love with a woman. She agreed to live and take care of each other until now. People around them including their family and villagers disagreed with their relationship, especially Mae Chhoeun's parents because they thought that the two of them would not be able to have children nor to make a good living. They continued to work did good things to their parents; they were committed to set an example for others to see their hard work. The couple could turn stigmas into appreciation through their lives together during the last 30 years when they live with happiness, kind and compassion for each other in a decent living. They also build merits with their villagers.



Horn Chhoeun and her family in 90s

History of Involvement with the Rainbow Community Kampuchea

In 2012, she met Mr. Noy Sitha, an organizer of RoCK, through Oum Eam who was transgender man living in a nearby village. Upon hearing this, Mae Chhoeun went to meet and told about the history of being a couple and overcoming obstacles to the organizers of the RoCK community. They got to know each other, kept in touch and she participated international human rights activity for the first time when it was celebrated in Khan Toul Kork, Phnom Penh. For Mae Chhoeun, it was an exciting and heartwarming experience as she had an opportunity to meet many LGBT+ people from different provinces. This was very different because at the village where she lived there were not many friends and they did not see human values in them very much.

Because Oum Eam was often sick, RoCK team asked Mae Chhoeun to help with organizing and keeping in touch with LGBT+ members in her area. *“The reasons I decide to join and became an active member were because I am an LGBT+ person and wanted to learn and understand more. In addition, RoCK has a strong commitment to lead LGBT+ people on a good path, know their values and see their own abilities.”*

In this meeting we talked to an active member who tried to finding solutions, mainly to response to the issues of non-recognition and discrimination at the grassroot level. The issue being the fact that RoCK members faced hardships due to the fact that their parents did not accept them. Active member, got involved on a voluntary basis and defines their role as an elder and a part of solution to help those who are in trouble. Apparently, young people start to know Mae Chhoeun and seek for her advice about how to come out and gain recognition

from family. In some cases, Mae Chhoeun also went to see parents of the partners to help explain to them by giving examples from her own life as well. Sometimes she helps young people to get a job when they come to ask her for help. In 2016, she spearheaded the work and acted as a host to bring RoCK team to meet and discuss with commune council members, commune police, and municipal administration about the possibility of organizing a workshop to raise awareness about sexual orientation, gender identities, and LGBT+ human rights. This workshop was organized in 2018. Commune chief and commune councilors in Stung Sen district could clearly understand the reasons why it was necessary to support the LGBT+ community and they started to conduct activities both at the local authority's level and at the personal level.



Strengthening community to support LGBT+ community workshop at Stung Sen city, Kampong Thom province in 2019

In early 2019, Mae Chhoeun and RoCK initiated to organize a Solidarity Flower Ceremony for the LGBT+ community and received members from other provinces. She also managed the contribution received from RoCK members and other villagers to help build a pagoda and alleviate the suffering of the elderly LGBT+ who needed help. Villagers and monks kept praising that the community knew

and respect custom, traditions and religion. It was a good thing that Mae Chhoeun initiated and worked together with other members from all generations to make this event a grand affair. Mae Chhoeun often participates in RoCK activities. She receives one part of support from Pa Chorn, her life partner. Mae Chhoeun said, *“I am very confident wherever I go, including when I come to join with you guys in RoCK, because Pa Chorn always considers that whatever I do is all useful; he never stops me. Instead, he always helps to take care of my work on my behalf. He is very important to me.”*



Bun Phka Samaki LGBT+ community at Kampong Thom province in 2020

Today, Mae Chhoeun is 69 years old now, but she is motivated to stay active. She joins in RoCK activities to achieve legal marriage for same sex couple, to make sure that young LGBT+ of next generations will gain equal rights. She also hopes that the next generation will be brave and responsible for their role and maintain the spirit of unity in the community without giving up on each other.

Fruitful Knowledge and Tips

Mae Chhoeun: *“In the past, we were not aware that we had rights and did not realize that we had laws to protect us and other people to support us. But then we learned from lawyers. We tried to find tips to resolve problems, such as going to the national government and educated people to make them understand our*

plights and help us to solve them. We have RoCK stands strong like a tree; there are LGBT+ in 25 provinces/cities and we are not alone anymore. We are a force to be reckoned with to give advices and support in order to achieve our goal for legal marriage for same-sex couples.”

Mae Chhoeun has positive thinking, hope, energy, and efforts to get involved in all activities with other RoCK members no matter how close or far or how many days she would spend. She never complains of feeling exhausted. Mae Chhoeun’s sacrifice and dedication is in order to make the voices of LGBT+ people heard more widely. She is a valuable role model.



Activities of RoCK’s LGBT+ community were visiting commune chief and commune councilor at Ou Kunthor commune, Stung Sen district, Kampong Thom province in 2019



PHANG SAMIN

A Lesbian Living in Svay Chrum District,
Svay Rieng Province

Phang Samin was born in 1963 in Svay Chrum district, Svay Rieng Province and still lives there today. She was a woman who identified herself as LGBT+. She identifies herself as a woman and has a male transgender partner, Pa Sen, both of them have been members of RoCK since 2009. They both are farmers and rice-wine makers. They take care of three young grandchildren. One of her grandchildren who is working in another province often calls and comes home during festival time; they have good family relationship as a warm and harmonious family.



Phang Samin during in the 90s

In that time, older people wanted to arrange a marriage for Mae Samin since she was an adolescence. Many men proposed to many her, but at that time she did not understand love. Although her parents already agreed to a marriage proposal, she asked her mother and the elders to refused to get married. At the age of 18, she got to know Pa Sen through her friends and Pa Sen's brother. They often met because they both went around to buy and sell rice bran together. At that time, Pa Sen kept his hair long but he dressed like a man. Although at the beginning she did not love Pa Sen, she felt compassionate toward him. After spending time together for a long time, they formed a romantic relationship with each other, and Pa Sen confessed his love for Mae Samin. It took them more than three years to explain to the families of both sides and found way to live together. Before deciding to live together, they agree with each other in advance that they must dare to struggle with the fact that they would not be accepted by others. This couple faced a lot of hardship, not in terms of making a living, as they had

to overcome insulting comments as the two women came to live together.



Phang Samin was standing with her husband and her child (in the middle) in 2017

Mae Samin recalled: *“At that time, no other LGBT+ couple could express their love for each other, only my couple did. We did not have anyone we could talk to. Despite we felt ashamed, we both thought that this should serve as a motivation for us to work hard and make our own living, avoiding depend on others to prevent them from looking down on us even more. Our efforts produced fruitful results because with our hard work with farming, we have a decent living and can have enough to eat.”*

Getting to Know Others Who are the Same to You

Mae Samin knew RoCK through Pa Sen. Later on, she met with Pa Sitha and Pa Sanh, LGBT+ community organizers in the RoCK community who visited her house to search for LGBT+ people in the area. Mae Samin could rarely attend activities organized by RoCK in Phnom Penh because she has to look after her

grandchildren and do housework when Pa Sen go to participates in those activities. This is an important support she offers to her husband so that he can bring their stories and that of other LGBT+ members to the discussion, which is also a step toward resolving their problems. Once a while, when Mae Samin come to attend meeting in Phnom Penh, she helps organize transport, tell us where to stay and take care of other members who are from the same village and members of the same community. She states, *“At the beginning, when we started looking for other LGBT+ people in the villages, we rode the bicycles for many kilometers; it was very difficult to meet them because some people did not trust us so they dared not tell us about their identity.”*

Mae Samin is getting to know more LGBT+ people in Svay Rieng and from other provinces, which makes her feel more comfortable. She can see that villagers reduce bad language and discrimination, which is a better situation than when she and her partner first fell in love with each other. This is also because they see her attending meetings and know that there is an LGBT+ organization supporting and promoting her rights and dignity. She continues to engage in RoCK’s works with hope, especially when she sees that the government become more supportive of them. She understands that it needs more time and discussions before they can achieve what the community wants, i.e., the legal marriage for same sex couple. Mae Samin wants marriage equality for the next generation of LGBT+ people so that they can fully register their marriage, get their family book and residence book.



Phang Samin with her husband together with LGBT+ community at Svay Rieng province in 2018

As we listened to Mae Samin's account, we were amazed with her broad knowledge, life experiences, courage, resilience, and support for her husband as well as other members of her community. Her patience, perseverance and hope for the common victory of the LGBT+ community in Cambodia is a record that RoCK members of all generations will remember and learn from.



SAM SEN

A Transgender Man Living in Svay Chrum District,
Svay Rieng Province

Sitting in the shade of a coconut tree accompanied by the humming sound of various birds and the wedding music from the other side of the village, Mr. Sam Sen recounted the story of his life to young people from RoCK community in a happy and joyful mood. He is a transgender man; he likes people in the community to call him “Pa”. Pa Sen is now 60 years old. He was born in 1963 and grew up in Svay Chrum District, Svay Rieng Province. Recalling his past during his adolescence when he was 15-year-old, in Khmer Rouge regime, he said that he was a strong person with short hair up to his neck. He began to fall in love with a girl living in the same children’s unit in the village but he dared not tell her. After the end of the dark regime, when he had long hair, there were men who proposed him for marriage but he did not have any romantic feeling toward men.



Sam Sen was taking care of cattle in the field nearby his house in 2024

Between 1979 and 1982, Pa Sen traded chickens, ducks and rice bran. He got to know a woman named Samin, his current wife. Mostly, young people call her Mae Samin to be paired with Pa Sen, her husband. He got to know and became friend with each other when he visited a house of an acquaintance in Mae Samin's hometown. Later, the two fell in love. Pa Sen has been in and out of Mae Samin's house for a year. At that time, Pa Sen's family and relatives never prohibit him, his mother even said, *"Child, it is very difficult for you to go back and forth like this. Why don't you just go and stay at Samin's place?"* Her words were the inspiration for him to decide to move to live there together to this day. When Pa Sen came to live together as a family with Mae Samin's family, the village chief recognized them and Pa Sen's parents also gave them cattle for farming.



Sam Sen with his wife in 2017

Pa Sen still dressed as a woman, i.e., keeping his hair long and tied it up as a bun. He loved short hair but dared not cut it because he felt ashamed and thought that he was the only person with such character. After living with his wife for a

year, he decided to sneak out to cut his hair with great reluctance. The most difficult thing was the fact that people were badmouthing him. They were very unfriendly and acted as if he did not exist. Some people called him “aunty”, but he was not angry with them. The most important thing was that he knew and felt satisfied with himself. *“What made me become very strong was the insult people said that we would not be able to earn our living and live our lives well if we as women became spouse” he said with determined eyes and some tears were about to drop. To such comments responded, “Love is not always about sexual desire. Love is from the hearts and caring for each other. It is about us being able to love each other and looking after one another.” And he keeps reminding himself, “I have to be strong and have a good career.”*

When he came to Phnom Penh to drive moto-taxi, do construction works and make wooden beds in the White Building area, Pa Sen realized that he was quite smart and able to do technical things like house painting just by looking at other people doing it. Therefore, he started to cultivate his skills in construction and become a home constructor until now.

In 2009, Pa Sen met Mr. Pheng Sanh (Pa Sanh), an LGBT+ community organizer of RoCK, through a man living in a village eastern to his place who worked with French people in Phnom Penh. That man told Pa Sanh that he knew a villager with short hair just like him. Seeing that Pa Sanh was interested and wanted to meet, that man gave him the phone number of Pa Sen’s brother-in-law. As a result, the two of them successfully communicating. Pa Sen added that at that time he was working in a construction site at Toul Tompoung area. He often received phone calls from Pa Sanh and Pa Sitha during his lunch break. They invited him to participate in the activities organized by RoCK. After talking to the two people two or three times, Pa Sen decided to attend. Pa Sen remembered that the first time they met was at during event held at a cafe around Boeung Keng Kang Market. Later on, he attended another activity conducted near Wat

Phnom. He was surprised because he could see many other people similar to him. He said: *“I no longer felt lonely when I found a hall full of people who were the same to me. Later, when RoCK registered itself with the Ministry of Interior as an organization, and the village and commune authorities recognized me as a person and were able to build a family of my own, I no longer felt afraid or lonely. My feeling was like having a harmonious family with proper home, stability and support I could rely on.”*



Sam Sen with his wife and his child in 2017

When he returned to his district, Pa Sen started to search and organize LGBT+ people who had not dared to come out yet to enable them to gradually become more courageous like himself. It was a difficult task but he was not alone. Sometimes his wife went with him to give him suggestion about what to say to organize new members for the community.

One day in 2013, a remarkable event took place. Pa Sen went to Svay Chrum market and found a person who seemed to be a transgender man. Pa Sen approached him and introduced himself, gave his phone number and invited him to attend activities organized by RoCK in Phnom Penh. Pa Sen told the person about the location of his house and invited him to visit to give him confidence. Later, Pa Sen saw the man came to his house. The man told Pa Sen, *“I took my nephew to see the doctor and just came by to visit your house.”* Later on, when they got to know each other better, the man came directly to visit Pa Sen’s house; he confessed that he did not take his nephew to see a doctor, actually at that time he just wanted to investigate to find out if Pa Sen’s house was really there. Pa Sen recounts all this with laughter. That man and Pa Sen now are RoCK active members in Svay Chrum district. They help each other to organize new members, keep in touch with the existing people and support each other to communicate with the authorities of different communes in Svay Chrum District. That man’s name was “Sun Phy”, and young people in RoCK Community called him “Brother or Bong Phy”.



Activities of organizing LGBT+ community member in 2016

Talking to this point, Pa Sen sipped some water and looked away at the rice field. He thought back to the time from 2009 until now. Pa Sen observes and make a remark happily in a fatherly tone that young people in RoCK community are very active and helpful to each other. Pa Sen pledges: *“As long as RoCK continues its operation, I will work hard to obtain the rights for marriage certificate for all of us, even this is not for my generation but it will be beneficial for younger people. I am very grateful that I came to know RoCK as this has brought happiness to my life until now. Without RoCK, I would have been lost and could not get to know anyone. Now, when people show their stigma, I dare to protest to defend myself and my family as well as our brothers and sisters in our community. We also have more support and recognition from authorities, so those people dare not show as much stigma as before. An important thing is that we have many members in our community; thus, even though we might not have RoCK with us in the future, we still have many good memories together.”*

As the elder member, Pa Sen wish to convey a message to young people of the next generation to be committed, love and care for each other. He wants to see young people to keep on the efforts, be hopeful and keep working together both the previous generation and younger generation. He added that as long as RoCK continues its operation and he is still alive and healthy, he will keep on fighting alongside RoCK. His trust, confidence and strong commitment is highly appreciated and it is a very important contribution toward achieving the dreams and needs of LGBT+ community in RoCK.



Local authorities with LGBT+ community member in 2021



SOT YUN

A Transgender Man Living in Bati District,
Takeo province



Sot Yun in 2015

Mr. Sot Yun, or Pa Yun is among the senior members who joined the RoCK since 2009. He was born in 1955 in Bati District, Takeo Province. He was born as a woman; and currently identifies himself as a man. Since he was young, Pa Yun liked and tried to wear pants as much as possible. *“I remember when I was studying in grade two during the 1970s, I wore pants to school but the teacher disapproved and sent me home.”* He recalled about his school age. He added, *“I wanted and liked to wear pants, but I did not think about myself as a man. Later, my father wanted me to get*

married, but I refused. I argued that if I were married, there would be no one left to climb the palm trees and produce palm sugar to generate income to support father.”

In 1976, during Democratic Kampuchea or the Khmer Rouge regime, a very hard time for him and all the Cambodian people in general, Pa Yun realized that he was falling in love with a woman; he then knew it clearly that he was a man. Pa Yun was curious about himself, but also knew that in his heart he was a man. He was happy with himself. He cut his hair, behaved and spoke in a way he considered a man of that generation should do. Together with the fact that he had strong physics, he could handle many laborious works. He went through many difficult life experiences before he could be with the person he loved, including the issues of family members attempted to separate him, lawsuit that forced both of them to leave their hometown to live by themselves without support from

family members and relatives. There were all types of hardships he had to endure before he could return to the village to build his home and win the hearts of the families on both sides. In the end, his hard work produced satisfactory results as both of them could live together to this day. They have built a large family with many children and grandchildren. Pa Yun uses multiple expertise to support his livelihood including producing palm sugar, rice farming, and stage manager for Bassac Opera Performance. For this last job, he is in charge of the stage as well as the paintings displayed behind each scene. In addition to his occupations, Pa Yun also fulfill his roles as a father and grandfather by looking after, teaching, orienting and supporting his children. Moreover, he is also a volunteer who assists with the work of local authorities and an activist for RoCK.



Sot Yun with his children and grandchild during in the occasion of warm shelter events in 2019

Like other active members who joined with RoCK since early on Pa Yun started out as a community organizer working as an unpaid volunteer. Pa Yun started to know about the LGBT+ network for the first time through WNU focal person. At that time, one LGBT+ person in his district introduced him to know community

organizers such as Noy Sitha, Pheng Sanh and Chak Sophoan. When he met Pa Sitha, he realized that they knew each other before, i.e., he was an audience who used to watch father Sitha performed Bassac Opera; however, they did not talk or befriend with each other at that time.

Pa Yun described about the development of RoCK's works that it started from scratch and continued to build teams of more people with budget to do more works. When he started his organizing work, he together with another activist would ride their bike cycles from village to village searching for LGBT+ people. They would asked for phone number and made home visit after they had met a few times. Later on, that another activist migrated to work abroad while Pa Yun continued to do organizing work and engage with RoCK for the past 14 years.



Sot Yun was together with LGBT+ community member who lived in Bati district, Takeo province in 2020

Pa Yun considers that this is one of his roles as an LGBT+ person; it is also the responsibility of all stakeholders to work together. Father Yun tell us the reasons

why he continues to be an active member as follows:

“I see that there are many people, for example development partners, who help us and think for us even though this is not their problem at all. RoCK team is also working hard and make a lot of efforts to think and take actions. Every time I attend a meeting with them, I feel safe both in terms of the venue and food. For this reason, we have to fulfill our duty as activists if we want the society to recognize us and the LGBT+ community.”



Picture memories was taken in 2024 which Sot Yun had displayed at his house

Through his hard work so far, Pa Yun is happy with results and hopes that the LGBT+ community will have improved situation and achieve our goal to change our legal status. Below are some of his inspirational words for RoCK community and especially the younger generation:

“Through joining with RoCK, in the beginning we talk about non-discrimination

and the right to work, etc. When Samdach Techo Hun Sen, the former Prime Minister, showed his support publicly, this was a part of the victory for our community! We have been working hard for quite some time and are getting closer to the success of having a marriage law for same sex couples! I am getting older, so I hope that the time will come and I can witness with my own eyes that we can get married legally as a Cambodian citizen. I hope the next generation of community members will continue to strive to achieve this dream.”



LGBT+ community with supporter in the occasion of dialogue with Cambodia government in 2023

Pa Yun is an elder who is committed, active and highly responsible with this work. He values being a good citizen. For this reason, young people and other people in the commune love and respect him; some of them even take him as their role model. He always shares his knowledge and gives opportunities for other members, especially young people, to join and learn about community organizing so that they will be able to take over the work he is doing. Authorities in his commune also sought his advice regarding LGBT+ people. The results reflect father Yun’s hard work, care and kindness for the community.



SEM EANG

A Lesbian Living in Bati District, Takeo Province



Sem Eang was in the occasion of RoCK 3rd general assembly in 2021

A woman named Sem Eang or Mae Eang, born in 1953, is an LGBT+ person living in Bati district, Takeo province. Now, let's start her story from the moment she observed that she had a feeling for her female friend named Sut Yun, who we now call Pa Yun. This is the beginning of her love of another woman who turned out to be her lover until now. From the beginning, both of them were friends living in the same village from their childhood until 1976 during the Khmer Rouge regime. They both were in a mobile unit together in another district where a group of adults used their labor

to do farming and carrying dirt. As an old saying goes, "At home you have different mother; in the forest you have the same mother," the two took care of each other and they became closer and closer to each other. Pa Yun helped to take care Mae Eang by lifting heavy objects and helped with some of Mae Eang's work. In her twenties, she did not know what love was yet. At one point, they were separated because Pa Yun was transferred out of that mobile unit. Although far away from each other physically, Pa Yun continued his care for Mae Eang as he often sent things to Mae Eang. As for Mae Eang, she cried often because she missed Pa Yun, a friend who used to be nearby. But Pa Yun's attention made it seemed like it was more than just friend; this made Mae Eang questioned her friend's intentions. Later, as she often fell sick and unable to work, and as a result being threatened to be killed many times, Mae Eang escaped from the mobile unit with her friends and returned to her hometown. Around 10 days after she was back home, she met Pa Yun again and they often went to see each other.



Sem Eang and her husband were in the Declaration of family relationship (private contract) signing ceremony in 2022

One day, when Mae Eang attended a wedding as a bridesmaid, she had to go and sleep over at the bride's house so that she could wake up early to get dressed up. Pa Yun called her to stay at his house and taking this good opportunity he confessed to Mae Eang that he loved her just like a man and woman. But Mae Eang refused and said that how could they love each other as they both were women. Pa Yun tried to talk and expressed his love and asked Mae Eang to live together as a family. But Mae Eang did not agree to this proposal. Pa Yun did not give up his efforts and kept explaining, even though Mae Eang was hesitant. Both of them remained friends and they went to collect firewood and kept their close relationship as usual. Mae Eang understood that this was a friend relationship which both of them were close to each other like sisters. However, she became soft-hearted and accepted that she felt more than just friend with Pa Yun. One time, the two of them were separated because Maw Eang was about to get married. Pa Yun left the village making Mae Eang missed him very much to an extent that she did not feel like eating or drinking anything. She fell ill and was

brought to see Khmer traditional healer as well as to see doctors; but they could not find out about the cause of her illness. At this point, she realized that she could not live without Pa Yun.

At the beginning of their life as a couple, parents and siblings from both sides did not understand about a love relation between women. As they were concerned about their children's well-being, they separated the two of them many times. They also filed lawsuits. The two of them tried to find ways to remain together and build a family. Finally, they decided to migrate to live in Battambang province for a while. Because their work there did not go well, they agreed with each other to return home. Finally, with support from a villager who gave them a plot of land, they built a hut to live in. Life was not easy for them as they had to work hard from nothing. They collected firewood, find wild bamboo sprouts to sell in the market to earn some money to buy rice. Later, they opened a small grocery store that could support themselves and their nieces and nephews as a family until this day. After overcoming all obstacles and difficulties together, Mae Eang and Pa Yun have been living together openly, happily, and no one come to separate them anymore.

She used to think that same sex lover in that generation happened only in her family. Some years later, a villager woman who identified himself as a man and had a female partner came to visit Pa Yun and Mae Eang at their house. That person explained Mae leng and Pa Yun and asked them to join as a LGBT+ community. They were invited multiple times to join community activity, but they were not interested nor trusted it. Later, Mae leng met a few other people whom Mae leng remember their names clearly, i.e., Chak Sophoan, Noy Sitha and Pheng Sanh. They came to her house to explain and invite them to participate in the learning and getting to know other members of the LGBT+ community. The couple decided to try it and participated. This was the beginning when they started to join RoCK. When she first attended the event, she saw LGBT+ people from different provinces and even foreigners. Mae Eang was excited as she did

not expect that there were so many LGBT+ people; this enable her to no longer feel lonely as before. This motivated her to help and share some burden of work of Pa Yun to allow him to do organizing work in some villages and communes in Bati District, Takeo Province. In addition, Pa Yun can also attend RoCK's meetings and events regularly. Moreover, she cooks and pack food for her husband and to share with members who attend the events. Both of them are respected by the community members and considered a model spouse, although both of them are women.



Declaration of Family Relationship (private contract) signing ceremony in 2022

It is commendable that Mae Eang, a woman who love another woman, could resist and struggle against her parents and family, i.e., dearest people to her, in such a strict social environment. In the end, this courageous determination allowed Mae Eang and Pa Yun to live together, build a family, become parents and grandparents of a warm family. Although Mae Eang did not work to organize

members for RoCK LGBT+ community, but she is always supportive of her husband by providing him food, water, words of encouragement for him to keep on organizing in the villages and to participate in activities organized by RoCK. She is willing to remain at home and bear all the burden in taking care of their children, their home and their livelihood. This is the most respectful spirit of devotion and unity. Pa Yun's progress and contribution to build and strengthen RoCK LGBT+ community also has Mae leng's supports.



PHANN SARY

A Transgender Man Living in Cheung Prey District,
Kampong Cham Province

In this world, there is something more comforting than love! As LGBT+, we want nothing more than a family to understand, acknowledge, and accept our identity.

As a girl with naughty attitude like a boy who liked to steal his brother's pants to wear, the little man always had his bike ready in the backyard so that he could escape easily when his brother threatened to beat him up. Seeing that he liked wearing pants, one of his brothers-in-law had a pair of pants made for him. This in-law, in return, felt very excited and in loved the pants greatly.



Phann Sary was in the International Human Right Day events in 2014

Phan Sary, or Pa Sary is the youngest of all the six siblings in a family with decent livelihood in Cheung Prey District, Kampong Cham Province. However, his attitude was not in conformity with social expectations for a woman at that time. He always asked his mother to had his hair cut short, otherwise he would carry tantrum by falling down onto the ground and cry hard there. He liked to play boy games, especially the game of fighting. With this attitude of a naughty child, he often had problems at school. Because, as a child Pa Sary had to walk to

school due to lack of own transport as well as the fact that he had poor health, he decided to drop out of school at a young age. As a playful child who created many incidents to make his father, mothers and siblings busy that brings a lot of love and anger, Sary received a lot of love from his family. He recalled with a smile: *“My parents love me very much; they would not say anything even though I have short hair and wear pants.”*

At the age of 18, Sary began to fall in love for the first time with a woman who lived next door. He did not dare to openly reveal his relationship; so, they kept meeting secretly. In 1980, he felt in love for a second time. This time he was no longer afraid of anyone, and openly told others, “This is my wife.” They lived and did their business together normally, just like other couples and people in general. At that time, there were not many LGBT+ people who dared to come out, which means that there were other LGBT+ people besides Pa Sary and his partner. As a saying goes, people of the same nature flock together, so even though the LGBT+ people at that time did not dare to come out, they still could recognize each other.



Phann Sary was in the RoCK 3rd general assembly in 2022

Because he is an elder and an old member of the RoCK LGBT+ community, we young people often call him Pa Sary; he is 69-year-old in 2023. Pa Sary has various livelihoods, such as raising chickens for sale, which is his main career. With his remaining time, he makes various type of snacks to sell at the market and in front of the factory, such as fried shrimp crackers, Khmer rice donut cake, roasted pumpkin seeds. On some days when he feels more energetic, he also makes Ansorm⁹ cake. What we admire most is his innate talent of craft. He cuts bamboo to make beds, utensils and drying racks. Just by observing a craftsman, he can also make that things very well and neatly. Visitors to his house may not notice, but some of the equipment he uses were made by himself from bamboo in the back of his house.



Phann Sary was visiting local authorities with RoCK LGBT+ community member and staffs in Cheung Prey district, Kampong Cham province in 2019

In 2009, Pa Sary got to know the Rock through community organizers as they searched for LGBT+ people in his commune. He also attended meetings with other members of the LGBT+ community in Phnom Penh and had many

⁹ Meaning: Traditional Khmer sticky rice cake

memories with them. Pa Sary recalled about the activities he attended: *“I remember and enjoyed the Pride Week 2018 program held at the riverside park in Ta Khmao city, Kandal province. At that time, our community came from many provinces and organized a lantern-floating ceremony. I spent one whole morning to cut banana leaves, arranged banana trees, decorated lanterns!”* Then he continued in a pleasant mood, *“I am now 80% hopeful that our community can achieve legal marriage for same-couples because we have supporters from different ministries and the number of RoCK members has increased year by year. I am very pleased with this progress.”*

In 2019, Pa Sary worked diligently to introduce the RoCK team to get to know local authorities in his commune. Because of Pa Sary, who resided in the district, the authorities did not get surprised about LGBT+ community. This helped to facilitate RoCK work with local authorities as well. When talking about local authorities, we are reminded about Pa Sary’s successful journey to make and get an equity card. He tried to meet the village chief and commune chief step by step to explain his current situation and needs; together with some advice provided by RoCK team, he could receive the card and benefits from it as a part of the social protection system, including access to health check at the health center and monthly stipend. Pa Sary has contributed to make positive changes in his own livelihood and for LGBT+ people in general by living openly as himself and actively participating in RoCK activities. It is also with his efforts to introduce the team to the authorities that people started to understand and support him as well as other members of the LGBT+ community.



Phann Sary was with RoCK's active members and staffs in 2019



SORN NOEUN

A 55-year-old Transgender Man Living in Pearang
District, Prey Veng Province

“I grabbed a small branch and sat down on the ground, wondering to myself who I was and why do I love a woman when I am a woman myself? Am I the only one in the world? When I was 13, I fell in love with a woman and I was wondering about myself; why did I felt so comfortable when I was near the person? It was more than just a normal friend. I had fantasy and wanted to be close to her but I dare not tell and let it be known, because I was afraid that she would stop being my friend when she found out about it. We remained normal friends, I always went to sleep at her house until my mother forbade me from going to another people’s house. From then on, I could not go to her house anymore.”

The above is the story from childhood and the self-awareness of Mr. Sorn Noeun, a transgender man, 55-year-old (born in 1968), born in Pearang District, Prey Veng Province. In his life journey, Bong Noeun struggled and overcome various life challenges, including knowing and being himself. The year 1994 was a time when Bong Noeun felt very lonely because of the changes that happened in family circumstances when his family member passed away. However, he continued to earn a living by relying on his own strength to harvest rice and buy rice from the villagers and transport it to



Sorn Noeun was in 2012

resellers. When he was able to live independently and without pressure from his family, Bong Noeun began to do what he loved, such as cutting his hair short and dressing like a man. But he still felt scared to come out in the village. Noeun observed that there were three or four couples of transgender and lesbian

couples in his village who did not come out but they lived together and do their farming normally. In 2004, one of the villager name Pov, asked him to attend a meeting organized by WNU, which also includes members of sex workers and LGBT+ communities. At that time, he met Pa Sitha, who was a senior transgender man, and created contacts with some other LGBT+ people, especially those with the same gender identity as himself.



Sorn Noeun was in the RoCK 3rd general assembly in 2022

Background of Joining with RoCK

When RoCK was established in 2009, Pa Sitha contacted Bong Noeun to join the Pride Week events in Phnom Penh as a member of the LGBT+ community. He also participated the program in the subsequent years. Later, he was asked to help other LGBT+ people get to know each other. He understood that this could help people felt less lonely; so, he did as much as he could and able to. Noeun also became an active member of RoCK and always participated in the capacity building meetings with other active members on a quarterly basis to raise issues

encountered by RoCK members to put for discussion and find solutions.



LGBT+ community in the occasion of RoCK quarterly active member workshop in 2019

In 2017, he also had the opportunity to liaise with authorities in his commune and other communes through visits and awareness raising workshops on sexuality orientation, gender identity, gender expression and gender characteristics of LGBT+ people. He recalled his first visit to meet with authorities: *“I began to feel nervous because I had never contacted the authorities before; I thought that the authorities would not support LGBT+ people. But I did not refuse and I brought RoCK team to meet with authorities. During the meeting, I still had butterflies in my stomach.”* Shortly after the meeting with the authorities, Noeun began to smile and felt excited and happy because the authorities not only welcomed us in a friendly manner, but they also introduced and shared information about LGBT+ people in his commune. Bong Noeun listened with excitement and smiled, not able to close his mouth. After that, he continued to contact with local authorities with a warm feeling and hope to meet with authorities in other districts as well. In 2020, because of being open-minded to learn from others, regardless of age,

as well as his intention to work to help the LGBT+ community, and as he had to move to work in Phnom Penh, he had the opportunity to work as a full-time volunteer member at RoCK. He helps with organizing and communicating with LGBT+ members in the provinces, especially the elderly people. Through volunteer work, he has contributed a large part to maintain friendships by diligently calling to chat with older members regularly to make them feel cared for and warm.



Sorn Noeun was with RoCK's staffs in 2022

The more he works, the braver he becomes and the more he understands about LGBT+ situation more broadly, both domestically and internationally. For example, LGBT+ people in some countries face discrimination as well as more serious violence than in Cambodia. There are also cases of fatality. Yet, they continue to struggle. Bong Noeun's courage has been steadily increasing step by step. The presence of Bong Noeun and other active members contributed to RoCK strong LGBT+ community organizing and maintaining a sense of solidarity.

When meeting with friends from other countries, even if they do not share the same language, Bong Noeun feels respect. This allows him to see his own value even more and it is very encouraging for him. On his returned to his country, he dares to tell other members of the community and his neighbors about his experiences and stories he had learn with confidence. This is a process of meaningful change for Bong Noeun; and he concludes that RoCK has a very important role to play in leading him through good experiences, making him a person of confidence and courage.



Lunch solidarity with Cambodia government, CSOs partners, supporter and LGBT+ community in 2022

Memories he remembers: *“One of the memories and hopes for me was during the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (7th ILGA-Asia conference) held at the Cambodiana Hotel, Phnom Penh. It was announced that Ly Pisey would be working as a full-time RoCK Coordinator. I was excited and happy because I knew her since she was young. I always wanted her to come to work for RoCK because I saw her commitment, honesty, not arrogance and see her good coordination talent. She has good facilitation skills*

and easy to understand. When there is a problem, she brings it to the table and talk to each other, not making decision alone. Pisey is a humble person, not bossy. When we go to work in the province, she washes the dishes when it is needed to. She is not bossy. She has long-term thinking and care about LGBT+ community members who are older people. These are the qualities and values of RoCK community leadership.”

My wish is for the LGBT+ community to have the legal marriage for LGBT+ equal rights so that we can live openly and equally to couple with the opposite sex without any fear. As one of the elders, my message to the community and younger people is, “No matter who you are, your age, your gender, your race or ethnicity, we must respect, love and value each other. Also, please maintain a caring relationship with older members!”

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Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK) is a Cambodian non-government organization dedicated for supporting LGBT+ rights in Cambodia. RoCK works closely with LGBT+ communities and respective local authorities across the country to ensure long-term protection and support of equal rights and acceptance for LGBT+ people and their families. We wish to see a Cambodia in which LGBTIQ citizens can feel happy to be who they are and live happy lives by having their rights protected and receiving full and equal respect and acceptance from all sectors of society, most especially families, communities, and authorities.

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