

*"Landmines are perfect soldiers: they never sleep and never die. However, they also don't know which side they're on, or when the war is over."*  
– Touj Soeurly, Chief of Veal Thom, landmine survivor

## *Bare Hands and Wooden Limbs: Healing, Recovery and Reconciliation in Cambodia*



*Ly Chantha, a former Khmer Rouge soldier whose wife and children were killed during the war, now a blacksmith, with his new wife, also an amputee.*

*In English and Khmer with English Subtitles*

*Digital Video 52:30 minutes*

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Cambodia's genocide was second only to the Nazi Holocaust. Although Pol Pot's murderous regime ended in 1979, the civil war itself did not end until 1992. The hard work of recovery and re-building is extremely difficult, partly due to landmines, which continue to maim and continue to kill people every day. Despite international assistance with the removal of one million landmines over the last decade, ten million still remain in the ground in Cambodia alone.

*Bare Hands and Wooden Limbs* is a film about healing. It follows the stories of two remarkable men at the opposite ends of the political spectrum, and their vision to establish a village for landmine survivors.

In 1975 Khmer Rouge forces kidnapped and tortured Chhem Sip, aged 14. He managed to escape, until he reached a refugee camp in Thailand. Eventually he was adopted by an American minister, became a U.S.

citizen and turned to activism to help other Cambodian immigrants. Yet, he never felt at peace. However much he assisted other Cambodians who had made to the U.S., he felt he owed even more to those he had left behind.

In 1970 Touj Soeurly became a Khmer-Rouge soldier, rising to the rank of Commander. He is a charismatic leader who trained his men in all the required military activities, including the laying of landmines. In 1989 he stepped on a landmine and lost a leg. He decided to leave the military and do something for former soldiers and civilians who had also become amputees, many of whom end up as beggars in the streets. Soeurly works out of a strong sense that he has miss-spent his life, that he needs to do something to compensate for his past.

The result is the village of Veal Thom, formed in 2000. The mission of Veal Thom is simple: to give at least some of the amputees of Cambodia, who are shunned outcasts in their society, a place where they can live and work – that is, can be self-sufficient, productive members of society.

Almost four hundred disabled people and their families now live in Veal Thom, each on an allotment of five acres. They build everything themselves – from houses to wells to schools – with their “bare hands and wooden limbs” in Chhem Sip's words. Sip was instrumental in helping the village grow, and worked closely with Soeurly. Thirty years ago Sip and Soeurly were on opposite sides of the war. But now they are working together, and Sip feels that he is now able to bury his bitterness about the past.

### **About the Filmmaker:**

*Alison McMahan is the founder and producer for Homunculus productions, a company that makes documentaries, industrials, and training films. Currently in postproduction on an industrial and PSA for Pensamento Digital, an NGO in Brazil that brings computers and internet access to Brazil's poorest communities. Our most recent production was the training film, Cambodia: Living with Landmines.*

**The Principal Crew:**  
*Written and Directed by Alison McMahan*  
*Produced by Alison McMahan*  
*Executive Producer Dr. Yvette Marrin*  
*Editor Kathryn Barnier*  
*Cinematographer Mathieu Roberts*  
*Composer Bronwen Jones*  
*Sound Design by Splash Studios, Inc. NY*  
*Online Edit by Glue Editing and Design, NY*  
*Narration by Sam Waterston*

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See the film trailer at [www.BareHandsWoodenLimbs.com](http://www.BareHandsWoodenLimbs.com)

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