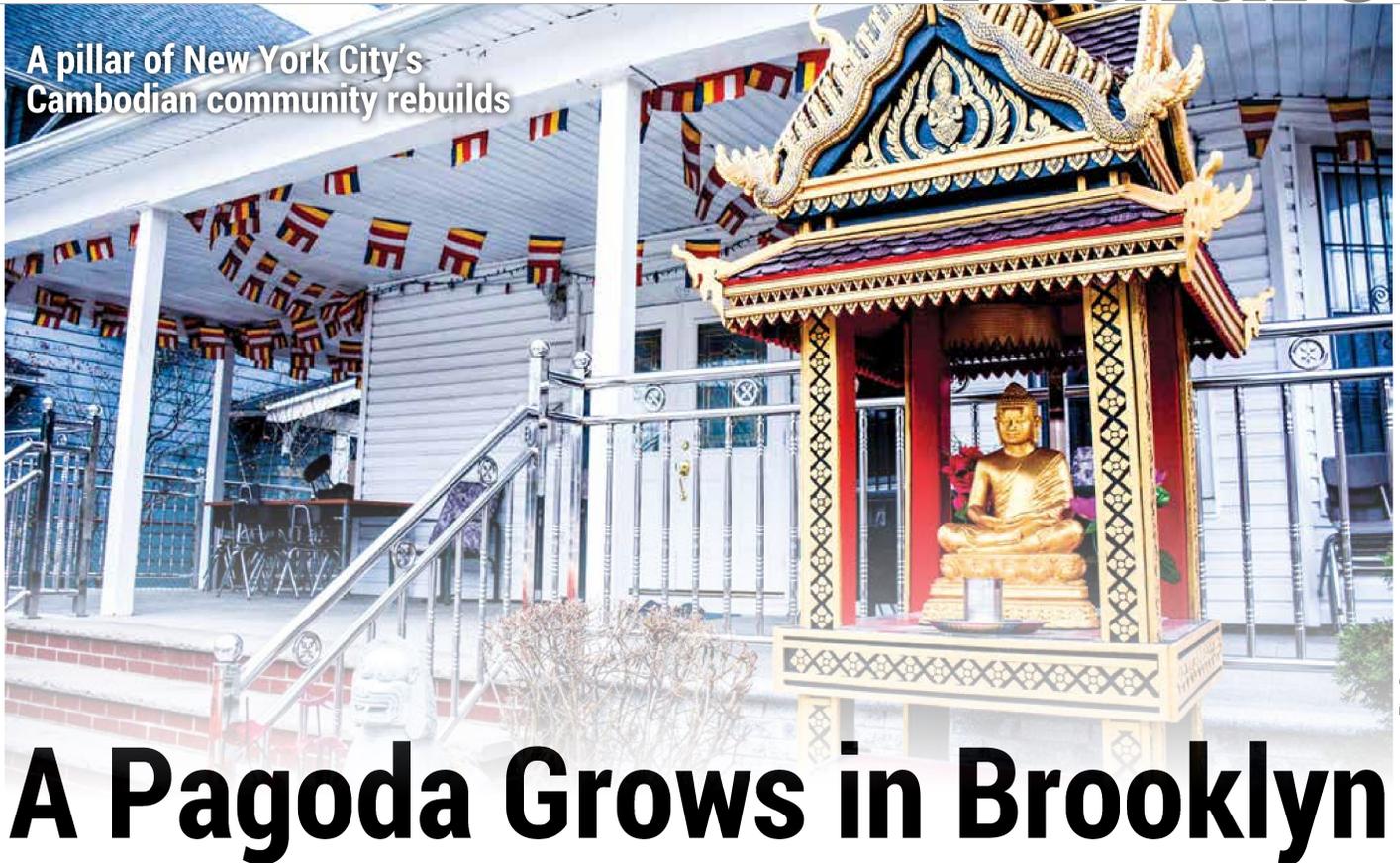


A pillar of New York City's
Cambodian community rebuilds



Tim Patterson

A Pagoda Grows in Brooklyn

By Jonathan Greig

Venerable Bunthoeun Thor brushes his copper-tinted robe out of the way before silently lighting a candle and a stick of incense in front of the towering Buddha statue covered in flower petals and sashes.

He sits back onto his heels and closes his eyes, pushing his hands together as he recites chants quietly to himself.

This is a scene you could probably find at any pagoda across Southeast Asia. Less so almost 9,000 miles away, in a standard, American-style home just south of the largest park in Brooklyn, New York.

Since 1983, Watt Samakki-Dharmikaram has primarily served the Cambodian community in New York and New Jersey. Ven. Thor said about 350 families, 200 of which live in Brooklyn, attend the pagoda regularly, and they often get visits from recent Southeast Asian or Chinese immigrants looking for a place to pray or just to get a taste of something similar to their homeland. They often coordinate events and celebrations with a pagoda in the Bronx, the only other pagoda in New York City.

For the last five years, newspapers have said the Cambodian community in the city is shrinking at an increasingly rapid rate. Many Cambodians fleeing the civil war came to New York City in the 70s and 80s, some of the worst years for the city in terms of crime and violence. As recent immigrants began to realize how difficult it was to live in New York City, more and more left for bigger

Cambodian hubs in Lowell, Massachusetts and Long Beach, California.

All of this history has led up to now, where the Cambodian community in the Bronx, which once even had an area dubbed "Little Cambodia," has all but disappeared. But this little pagoda in a house on a side street near Prospect Park is doing all it can to fight this narrative, pushing the Cambodian families in the borough to make their ties even stronger, and foster a closer-knit community than ever before.

Under the guidance of Temple President Kenny Seng and Treasurer Mean Mak, the pagoda has undergone a whirlwind of changes in the last four years. The pagoda and organization behind it fell into disrepair, but Mr. Seng and Mr. Mak have worked to renovate the building, set up legitimized fundraising and build back a community that was once a hallowed member of New York's vibrantly diverse patchwork of ethnic communities.

"During the last four years we've been busy with the repair and renovation jobs for the Temple because the previous team did not do a thing to improve it. It was in a very bad shape," Mr. Mak said.

In 2014, the community managed to raise more than \$100,000 to help with repairs to the pagoda, and last year they raised over \$80,000, giving the organization more flexibility in terms of planning events and helping Cambodians in need. Mr. Mak emphasized that the new leadership of the pagoda has prioritized trust over everything else. Many of the Cambodians in the

community separated themselves because of the disorganization and lack of transparency within the pagoda.

"We have more and more people joining us during our major events, so, in other words, everything is unprecedented for this Temple, especially for it to do this well," Mr. Mak stated. "I can see a brighter future for Watt Samakki. The culture of accountability that Kenny and I put in place makes many of our small community members see that things are a lot more different than they used to be."

Although the pagoda tends to attract the older members of the Cambodian community, Mr. Mak and Mr. Seng have made it a priority to reach out to younger members, creating a Facebook page and holding events on Khmer holidays to not only connect young Cambodians, many of whom see themselves as Americans first, with the rest of the Cambodian community in New York, but also with their traditional Khmer roots in Cambodia itself.

Some members of the pagoda have banded together to create the New York City Cambodian American Association (NYCCAA) in an effort to attract young professionals with no previous connections to the community.

Arun Riith, a recent Cambodian immigrant living in the pagoda and a member of NYCCAA, said the community is small but is becoming closer-knit by the day.

"The pagoda lets me stay here while I study electrical engineering at City College," he said. "They have been so supportive of me. That was something I did not find in Lowell."

Only two years ago, Mr. Riith moved from Kampong Cham to Massachusetts after receiving a scholarship to study in the US. He eventually left Massachusetts for New York, and the pagoda supports him as he studies with housing and a small stipend.

Ven. Thor is also a recent arrival, as the community brought him over from Cambodia to assist the other monk at the pagoda and expand the organization's outreach to the community. Hailing from Takeo province, 26-year-old Ven. Thor said he has been a monk for six years, and spent time in Phnom Penh studying for his current role.

His youth was part of his appeal. The pagoda leadership wanted someone who could connect with a new generation of Cambodians and give them some sense of what Cambodia was really like.

"I'm not sure how long I will stay," he said. "But more people are coming to the pagoda these days. If they stay, I'll stay." ■



Bunthoeun Thor, resident monk, inside the Watt Samakki temple.

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