

His Brothers' Keeper

Lawyer Gregory Stanton refuses to let the world ignore the genocide of two million Kampuchean. This is the story of their tragedy and his dedication.

By Michael Matza

There is a compelling sense of mission about 35-year-old Gregory Howard Stanton, a 1982 graduate of Yale Law School. This past April, Stanton launched a one-man effort he calls the Kampuchean Genocide Project, through which he hopes to raise \$300,000 to send researchers and scientists to Southeast Asia to gather evidence that would document—precisely and for posterity—the crimes of the Pol Pot government in Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia) from April 1975 through the end of 1978.

Although it was thrown out of power by a Vietnamese-backed invasion in 1979, the government that was named for Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot still represents Kampuchea as part of a united front in the United Nations. That it does so belies a past that survivors of Khmer Rouge brutalities remember with dread. In the three and a half years that it was in power, the Pol Pot regime is said to have intentionally murdered at least one million Kampuchean and to have imposed conditions of slave labor, starvation, and forced evacuations that resulted in the deaths of more than one million others. In a country of approximately eight million people, one quarter of the population was systematically exterminated through a maniacal program that seemed like the Final Solution writ small.

For Greg Stanton, such mind-boggling carnage imposes a personal obligation. “There are people who can become numb to the killing. People who see one mass grave and can’t go to another,” the founder and director of the Genocide Project told the *New York Times* in April when he announced his plan to raise private funds to finance the project. One of his aims is to have the evidence—and the murderers—tried before the World Court in The Hague, Netherlands. “But part of it is that after you’ve gotten to know people in Kampuchea and heard their stories—and everyone has lost someone—you begin to realize how personal mass murder is. Impersonal to the murderer, but personal to the victim. You hear enough, to the point where the stories add up to a duty.”

While still at Yale, Stanton began to wonder how he could bring what he was learning in law school to bear on the tragedy of Kampuchea. He discussed his thoughts with his law professors. “What we had here was a case of massive violation of international law that once again was going to go unpunished,” Stanton recalls thinking. “A world government of laws—not just naked power—doesn’t let mass murderers escape scot-free.”

Stanton knew that evidence would be the backbone of any campaign to have other countries recognize and officially deplore what happened under Pol Pot. Stanton decided the project should be an independent one so that it could be free of bureaucratic delays or political influence. He is, therefore, single handedly contacting foundations and private

donors. Stanton says talks with foundations are in the “negotiation phase,” but he hopes to reach his goal of \$65,000 for 1982-83, which would make it possible for fact gathering to begin in Kampuchea. The funds will pay small salaries and expenses for historians, who will interview survivors to gather stories about the events of 1975-78, and forensic pathologists and other scientists, who will examine bodies and mass graves to establish the way in which people died.

Once the evidence is gathered—he hopes by 1984—Stanton plans to make use of it in several ways: He hopes to publicize the information (after having its credibility established by distinguished international jurists) and to have a country that is a signatory to the International Genocide Convention bring the charge of genocide against the Pol Pot regime before the World Court. Hearings before the World Court would probably begin within the same year.

To be sure, there is more than the average sense of duty in Stanton, who describes himself as a committed Christian and whose every undertaking is rooted in “the belief that God is the ultimate reality and that God’s love is the most powerful force if we want to use it.” A native of Racine, Wisconsin, Stanton grew up as the oldest son of a father who is a pastor of the Presbyterian church and a mother who is an English teacher. From them he learned respect for the “powers of the mind” and a “commitment to racial justice.” It was the kind of education that one picks up from a father who organized an Oberlin, Ohio, sit-in in 1945 to integrate a barber shop and from a mother who was dedicated to teaching family values to children who included an adopted daughter from Nicaragua and a son from the Netherlands.

Stanton’s parents inspired his formal education, too. Both are 1943 graduates of Oberlin College, and their son enrolled there in 1964. He combined scholarship with activism, earning a Phi Beta Kappa key in government in his junior year and a position in the student senate, from which he denounced American involvement in the then escalating war in Vietnam. But his views were liberal, not radical. In an April 1968 article published in *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, an article based on a speech Stanton gave to the Cleveland Human Rights Day Institute the previous December, he made his views plain.

“Yes, many of today’s students are in revolt,” he wrote. “We are rebels in a society full of injustice; rebels in a society which not only fails to locate even one public hospital in Cleveland’s Hough ghetto, but also bombs a North Vietnamese leprosarium to the ground. We are rebels against a war in which bombers carrying the name of our country drop flaming napalm on men, women, and children, and sear the flesh from human bones; rebels against the arrogance of a powerful nation which has intervened in a civil war halfway around the world; rebels to change a society in which 40 percent of black families have an income of less than \$3,000 a year, where 20 percent live in substandard housing; rebels against a national policy which spends \$30 billion a year to burn cities and villages in Vietnam at the same time our own cities are burning with hatred and frustration. We are rebels with a cause and the name of our cause is human rights.”

A few paragraphs later, Stanton moderated his rhetoric: “We students can make all the ‘Support our boys; Bring them home now’ posters we want, but when we demonstrate violently nobody’s listening. If our aim is political *realism* rather than

emotional catharsis, our tactics must be aimed to *convince*, not alienate, the American 'Middle.' I don't believe there is going to be a violent revolution in the United States, nor do I think that if there could be one that it would bring a change for the better. Our nation does need a continuing 'revolution' in social justice—a continuing 'revolution' for racial equality; continuing progress against poverty. But this kind of 'revolution' will come about only by continuing political *evolution*... Senator [Robert] Kennedy has shown that the way to reform is not through alienation but through participation in the political process. Those of us who oppose the war should rally around men like Senator Kennedy, not around the cars of military recruiters."

Idealism tempered by pragmatism. In Stanton's life, the two traits combine to form something of a leitmotif. It was idealism that led him into the Peace Corps in 1969—to a post in a small village in west Africa's Ivory Coast—and pragmatism that led him to turn his experiences there into the themes for a master's thesis in anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1973, and a doctorate for which he hopes to complete a thesis this year.

"I was a B.A., a generalist, health planner, you know, one of the kind of people that the Peace Corps used to recruit. I was expected to go in and do health education with a team. One of the objectives was to introduce planning and organizational methods to the team chief and to the people on the team. But, of course, I learned a great deal more than I ever could teach them," Stanton recalls. What he learned became the subject of his doctoral dissertation: "Religion and Health Among the Ebrié of the Ivory Coast." It was in Africa that Stanton met the woman to whom he was wed in 1973, an American nurse-midwife who was working in a Biafran refugee camp.

Stanton's passion for scholarship and religion came together again at Harvard Divinity School, from which he received a master's degree in theology in 1974. He's the kind of person who says, "I'll pray about that," at times when others might say, "I'll think about that," and he admits his decision to seek a career in the law had deep religious overtones. "I guess I felt for some time I should try to apply my life to working for justice. I think that's central to the biblical tradition," he says. "Of course, the prophets told us that justice does not always happen through law. But the more that I looked at my interests, the more I came to the conclusion that legal training would give me the tools I would need to take some of the faith commitments that I have toward serving God—and loving people—and apply them in a practical way." After completing his first year at the University of Chicago Law School, Stanton transferred to Yale in 1979. His wife, Mary Ellen Stanton, took a teaching position at the Yale University School of Nursing. The peripatetic Stantons had settled down. Or so it seemed.

Stanton—an avid student who won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship in 1968 and a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship in 1975—blossomed in the competitive atmosphere of Yale. Among the electives in which he took great interest was international law, a subject he studied under nationally prominent professors Myres McDougal and Michael Reisman. In many ways, international law was the perfect specialty for Stanton, a well-traveled citizen of the world, whose style stresses common humanity over national distinctions. Indeed, prior to enrolling at Yale Stanton had already visited exotic parts of the globe that many of his younger classmates had only read about. There was the Ivory Coast, of course, and a vacation during which he hitchhiked north across the Sahara Desert. There was the trip to Scotland and the summer of 1973 spent in Israel—at Hebrew University in

Jerusalem—studying archeology. In 1978, he began a year's study of Indian constitutional law at the Indian Law Institute in New Delhi, a field placement of the Program for Professional Studies in India of the University of California, Berkeley.

Stanton's first year at Yale was coming to an end when he received a call from New York. The Stantons, it seemed, were destined to be on the road again. On the phone was a friend who knew Greg Stanton well, knew of his trips to Africa and India, of his fluency in French, and of his deep faith in Christianity. He was recruiting Stanton in the name of a New York-based group called Church World Service, one of the first American relief organizations to be allowed into Kampuchea by the new Vietnamese-backed government that had overthrown Pol Pot only a year earlier.

"They came to me and asked me to direct their relief program," Stanton recalls. It was the first week of January 1980, and Stanton was in the middle of his second year of law school. "I said, 'Look, you know, I just got back from India three months ago, my wife's got a job as an assistant professor at Yale; she's just started that; we were hoping this year we would start a family; please let me pray about this.'" He did pray about it and, as he remembers, "I came to the strong conclusion that if they did want me to go, that I should. "I don't believe in voices coming out of the heavens, or anything like that, but I had a very strong feeling that if they wanted me to go I should go." After only a few months in the States, the Stantons were packing their bags again. Greg left first; Mary Ellen followed soon after.

In Kampuchea, Stanton did comprehensive program planning in the areas of agriculture, health care, and community needs. He rushed emergency rice shipments to areas where people were starving. He made formal recommendations to the government for long-term rehabilitation of the agricultural system and reconstruction of the economy. He recruited specialists from socialist countries—because the new socialist government would more readily allow these people to work with the native population—to teach modern planting and cattle-raising techniques. He rode herd on a \$12 million budget drawn from donations from Church World Service, CARE, Lutheran World Relief, and Meals of Millions/Freedom from Hunger.

Stanton's relief work in Kampuchea lasted six months, but it opened his eyes to the suffering of a lifetime. As director of Church World Service relief efforts in Phnom Penh, he heard from survivors about a regime that had come to power in 1975 amidst cheers and high hopes that turned—almost overnight—into cries for mercy and nightmares of butchery.

As he learned more about the country, Stanton realized that the conditions that permitted the victory of the Khmer Rouge had not been created overnight—they had been a long time in the making. Although it is the smallest country in Southeast Asia, Cambodia has had more than its share of turmoil. There was, of course, the late 1960's, under Prince Norodom Sihanouk, when the country strived to maintain its neutrality in the escalating war in Vietnam. But U.S. military advisers at the time suspected that border areas of Cambodia were being used as sanctuaries by the National Liberation Front and its North Vietnamese allies.

The election of Richard Nixon radically altered U.S. policy in the region. Under Nixon, the United States secretly began to bomb the sanctuaries. As the bombing increased, the Viet Cong moved farther into Cambodia, bringing the war with them. What happened next was well summarized by Michael Rezendes, writing in the *Boston*

Phoenix in December 1981: “In increasingly desperate attempts to preserve his nation’s neutrality, Sihanouk continued to play the Americans against their Vietnamese adversaries (themselves, historically, enemies of Cambodia), angering United States policymakers. In a short time the growing war destabilized his government. In 1970, a year after the American bombing of Cambodia had begun, Sihanouk was replaced by General Lon Nol, who immediately allied his government with the U.S., committing Cambodia to fight against two enemies: the North Vietnamese and the growing forces of the Khmer Rouge.”

Lon Nol’s troops opposed the mountain-based Khmer Rouge for five bitter years. On April 15, 1975, the Khmer Rouge rolled into Phnom Penh, declaring victory over Lon Nol and bringing what many hoped would be an end to the dying. But the people quickly learned that the horrors had just begun. Within days, Khmer Rouge troops began a forced evacuation of the city. Telling people that the Americans planned to bomb Phnom Penh (a suggestion that was not unthinkable after long years of war), armed troops marched city people into the countryside. Despite the primitive nature of the communication system, word spread quickly that no U.S. bombing of Phnom Penh was expected and that the Khmer Rouge victors were up to no good. The presence of the heavily armed, teenage soldiers—described by *New York Times* Cambodia correspondent Sydney Schanberg as “universally grim, robot-like, brutal,” with weapons that “drip from them like fruit from trees”—heightened the tension.

As the people learned, there was much to be apprehensive about. The revolution was destined to be a bloody one; anyone who did not fit into Pol Pot’s new order was quickly killed. And the new order was nothing if not bizarre. It was based on eradicating “foreign influence” and on returning Cambodia to a simple, agrarian, almost feudal economy of country rather than city people. Although they were educated in France, the Pol Pot leaders eschewed the sophistication and 20th-century innovations of the West, and were determined to remove these influences from Cambodia.

“From our small window on their revolution—the [French] embassy’s front gate—we can see glimpses of their ‘peasant revolution,’” wrote Sydney Schanberg. “There is no doubt that the Khmer Rouge are turning Cambodian society upside down, remaking it in the image of some earlier agrarian time, casting aside everything that belongs to the old system, which has been dominated by the consumer society of the cities and towns. Some of the Khmer Rouge soldiers we talk to speak of destroying the colonial heritage and use phrases like ‘purification of the people’ and ‘returning the country to the peasant.’”

It quickly became clear that the revolution would not be bogged down by humanitarianism. “They took the people and they just marched them at gunpoint out into the countryside. The result, of course, was many, many deaths,” says Stanton, describing what he learned from the survivors. “They evacuated hospitals. They made people who had literally just had an operation get out of the hospital. Of course they died. There was one whole ward of sick children at a combat hospital. They were little. They couldn’t walk. Nobody picked them up. Nobody took them out. The whole ward died. They became a mass grave.”

The logic of the new order was grotesque. As Schanberg has written, “The Draconian rules of life turned Cambodia into a nationwide *gulag*. The Khmer Rouge imposed a revolution more radical and brutal than any other in modern history—a

revolution that disturbed even the Chinese, the Cambodian Communists' closest allies. Attachment to home village and love of Buddha, Cambodian verities, were replaced by psychological reorientation, mass relocation and rigid collectivization. Families were separated, with husbands, wives and children all working on separate agricultural and construction projects. They were often many miles apart and did not see each other for seasons at a time. Sometimes children were separated completely from their parents, never to meet again. Work crews were sex-segregated. Those already married needed special permission, infrequently given, to meet and sleep together. Weddings were arranged by the Khmer Rouge, en masse; the pairings would simply be called out at a commune assembly. Waves of suicides were the result of these forced marriages."

Of course, the majority did not die at their own hands. The new order also produced unprecedented famine. "In Dam Dek," writes Schanberg, "the rice ration was eventually reduced to one spoonful per person per day. The villagers, desperate, ate snails, snakes, insects, rats, scorpions, tree bark, leaves, flower blossoms, the trunk of banana plants; sometimes they sucked the skin of a water buffalo." To the west of Dam Dek the famine was even more severe. Reportedly, some people were digging up the bodies of the newly executed and cooking the flesh.

Pol Pot had effectively muzzled a free press. Not until years later—primarily through books such as *Cambodia Year Zero* by Francois Ponchaud and *Murder of a Gentle Land* by John Barron and Anthony Paul—would the horrible truth be widely known.

"There are an awful lot of unexcavated mass graves. All over the country. It really is amazing," says Stanton, who was present when one mass grave was opened at Choeng Ek. "It actually has an effect on the vegetation. And people know, because a lot of the people who lived in the area are still living nearby, and they say, 'Oh, the killing ground is over there.' If you go out to a village in Kampuchea and ask, 'Where's the killing ground?' you'll find that nearly every commune had one." Who could be executed? Anyone who could be conceived of as independent or threatening in any way. It was a systematic extermination of all former intellectuals, teachers, anybody connected with the former military—officers especially—even people who complained about short rice rations," Stanton continues. "Oh, they were ridiculous things. People were killed because they had broken a hoe. Capital punishment was invoked as a terror mechanism. They didn't use bullets, because that wasted bullets. People were mostly hit in the back of the head with hoes. They were bludgeoned to death."

It was not unusual for the killing fields to hold the bones of thousands of bodies. Often the bodies were barely covered by a layer of earth or disposed of in some other way. "In the water wells, the bodies were like soup bones in broth. And you could always tell the killing grounds because the grass grew taller and greener where the bodies were buried," Schanberg writes.

If Stanton's experiences of a once gentle land are tainted by stories of death, they are also colored by an event that he views as something of a miracle—the adoption of his daughter, Elizabeth Chantana Stanton. She is a Cambodian child, and the middle name Greg and Mary Ellen chose for her means "gift of God" in Khmer. Given the circumstances under which she came to the Stantons, it is not hard to see why her father has become obsessed with the history of her homeland. Although they are meant to be

widely disseminated, the results of the Cambodian Genocide Project's investigation will also be something of a legacy to a daughter who will one day want to know about the world from which she came.

The story of how Chantana came to the Stantons is a touching one. "She was abandoned at the entrance to the National Pediatric Hospital on the sixteenth of November, 1980, the date of her birth. We know it was the date of her birth because my wife is a midwife and the umbilical cord was fresh and the first stool she had was the kind of stool that a newborn baby has," Stanton recounts. "You know, you should not leave a newborn, healthy baby at the hospital; that's where all the kids are sick. And the doctor in charge didn't want to take the baby to the orphanage, because at the orphanage about fifty percent of the kids died who were under three months old. It's a very difficult place for a newborn baby. They can't get the kind of holding, and total devotion they need."

What the doctor in charge did was turn the baby over the Stantons, the only married couple in the relief community. The circumstances could not have been more dramatic. It was a Sunday morning, the Stantons were at a prayer service singing the old Christian hymn "Just As I Am," and the doctor carried the baby into the room at the end of the final verse. "The doctor put her in my wife's arms and asked us to take care of her until the government decided what should be done," Stanton recalls. Almost immediately the Stantons contacted, then visited, the Foreign Ministry and asked if it would be possible to adopt her. Since no foreigner had adopted a Khmer child since 1975, the decision was deemed of such importance that it was referred to the president and his Revolutionary Council. While the Stantons waited, they took care of the baby. They had six diapers, a couple of undershirts, a few bottles, and formula that was brought in a couple of times a week in the Red Cross mail pouch. Chantana weighted six pounds and slept between them at night. Five weeks later, the secretary to the president signed the papers making her adoption final.

"Despite all these barriers—nationality, ideology, race, religion, you name it, every single barrier known to man—they understood that we would love that child and that she needed us," says Stanton, his eyes filling with tears. A week later, Stanton flew to Singapore—site of the nearest American embassy—to arrange for a passport for his daughter. On Christmas Eve, Greg, Mary Ellen, and their "gift of God" flew to the United States. He returned to Yale, and after graduation this past summer worked as an intern with the Milwaukee firm of Foley and Lardner. Presently, Stanton is a law clerk to Judge Alfred P. Goodwin of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in Portland, Oregon. When he finishes his clerkship in September this year, he hopes to return to Foley and Lardner to specialize in international and commercial law.

For deeply personal and broadly humanitarian reasons, Stanton is committed to seeing that the world does not ignore the depredations of the Pol Pot years. He plans to disseminate the project's findings through several avenues: international law journals, magazines, and newspapers; through international human rights groups; and through the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which has been soliciting information on Cambodia since 1978, when Norway initiated a formally complaint against Pol Pot.

During a visit to Kampuchea last March to do preliminary work on the project, Stanton secured permission from government officials to send several teams—including forensic pathologists, photographers, Khmer interpreters, microfilm technicians, and international-law experts (recruited mainly from academe and international human rights organizations)—into the country to gather testimony and physical evidence. Two people will live in Kampuchea and direct the investigation: Ben Kiernan, a professor affiliated with Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and Kiernan's wife, Chantou Boua, a Khmer economist. Stanton met and worked with them during his relief stint.

"It is urgent that the evidence be gathered now. The mass graves are turning to dust and the memories of the witnesses are fading. Documents are disintegrating. If these massive crimes are not to be forgotten or left in a limbo of conflicting propaganda charges, documentation must be undertaken immediately," Stanton said in announcing the aims of his project.

The similarities to the period after the Nazi holocaust are implicit. The importance of quick action in cases of this type was reinforced recently by Patricia Clough, writing in the *Boston Globe* on August 22, 1982. "Four decades after the holocaust, the life span of both persecutors and persecuted is running out. Many of the Nazi tormentors, the survivors and witnesses are already dead, others are too old or frail to stand trial or give evidence. Those who do are often unable to remember clearly what happened. Proof is increasingly difficult to establish. The Madjanek case, the last big extermination camp trial, which ended last year, was dogged by such problems. The nine accused were only a tiny fraction of the 1,300 of the camp—the others were either dead, unfit, convicted in other courts, had fled to the safety of South American countries, or were simply untraceable. The court knew perfectly well what horrors took place at Madjanek, where at least 200,000 and possibly one million Jews were slaughtered. The difficulty was finding irrefutable evidence to convict each individual accused.... West German justice is now paying the price for having started seriously prosecuting Nazi criminals very late and not pressing the cases fast enough."

To be sure, Kampuchea has had its "show" trials. In 1979, a trial in absentia was held for Pol Pot and his terror tactician Ieng Sary: both men were convicted of mass murder by the current Vietnamese-backed government. But Pol Pot is safe in exile, and Ieng Sary often speaks for him at the United Nations in New York.

"We haven't the resources nor the political purpose to organize a tribunal of any kind—a Nuremberg kind of a thing—that isn't yet our purpose. That has to be done by governments. But what we would like—is that if the evidence proves genocide, and I think that there's a pretty strong case, then a government that is a signatory to the Genocide Convention can, under Article Nine of that convention, which has never been invoked, never been used, take the case to the World Court and get the World Court to declare [that genocide occurred]," Stanton explains. He believes that the teams he plans to send to Kampuchea will make the case. Of course, the authority of the World Court is not absolute—Iran pointedly ignored its censure during the hostage crisis—and Stanton admits he is as unsure as anyone about the punitive value of negative world opinion.

But Stanton, the pragmatic idealist, believes he's got to start somewhere. "We are, in the area of building international law, where nation states were, in the area of building national law, several centuries ago.... The only way that law gets built and that legal institutions become viable is by using them and by exercising them.... If the

Genocide Convention is going to be taken seriously by anyone, it damned well ought to be applied where there is genocide.”

If Gregory Howard Stanton has his way, it damned well will.

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